

interzone

AUGUST 2002

NUMBER 181

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Eric Brown
Richard Calder
Mat Coward
Geoffrey A. Landis
Norman Spinrad

plus an interview with
Bruce Sterling



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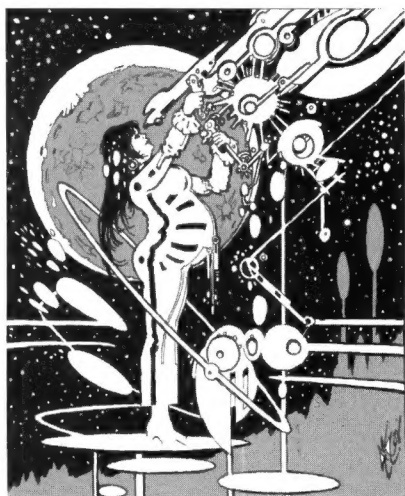
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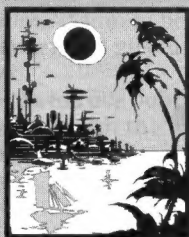
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science fiction & fantasy

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Dip a Pen in Your Heart and Write!

Garry Kilworth remembers Richard Cowper

(John Middleton Murry, 1926-2002:

teacher, author, painter, craftsman)

The title is a direct quote from Colin Murry's novel *Private View*. It tells us a lot about the author, for this is how the late John (Colin) Murry wrote, directly from the heart. John once told me he found writing an emotional activity, joyful but also quite painful on occasion. Perhaps one of the reasons why he abandoned writing while his career was still flourishing was that the pain had overcome the joy? Certainly his heart was still full, for he turned to painting with as much enthusiasm as he had taken up writing. Instead of the pen he began dipping a brush into that well of colour and light.

Coming as I do from farming stock I was immensely proud of my friendship with John, a writer from a real literary family. John Middleton Murry was the son of the famous critic whose name he bore in full. The first wife of John's father was Katherine Mansfield. D. H. Lawrence and George Orwell were familiar faces around the house. Walter de la Mare dandled John on his knee. This literary background was enough for me to look on John with some envy and awe, when we first met at a science-fiction writers' workshop in the mid-1970s, but he never allowed that. Envy and awe would not have been acceptable to this warm and gentle man, a man of considerable talent. He wanted nothing from others but a return of his own broad smile, firm handshake and sincere delight in meeting a fellow writer.

If that was not enough to melt any reserve I felt, those bright blue eyes did their work. I have never met anyone with such warmth and

friendship in their eyes. John always somehow managed to put me in touch with a mellower time than the one we were living in. I don't really know what that time represented: perhaps that lost golden era some of us look back on, probably with false memories? I know it had nothing to do with any mystic aura or spiritual power. It was simply his tone and way of speaking, his easy manner, his effervescence. Occasionally there was grit there, when he had been upset by someone, but I never saw malice. John was a modern man, living in the present, but glowing with something of the past. He could help you appreciate art and poetry like no other man I've ever met. And he did it with a chuckle and an easy manner, for he was anything but a pedant.



I admired his writing enormously. It was John's science fiction, written under his sf pseudonym of Richard Cowper, that inspired me to write my own. His prose came directly from his spirit: it was warm, touching, non-violent and brimming with ideas. I don't believe in best or worst books, I only believe in favourites. My favourites were *Clone* and *The Road to Corlay*. *Clone* because it was an extremely humorous book and because the relationship between a young man and a talking ape was so heartfelt and profound it left a terrible yearning in me. *The Road to Corlay* because the world in this book, which he had developed from a short story "Piper at the Gates of Dawn," was magical, frightening and enthralling. Once I came to know John, and my wife Annette and I were

invited to his home, I learned of his earlier works written as Colin Murry. *The Golden Valley* and *A Path to the Sea* are beautiful books, the first set against a corn-coloured haze of young love, the second an unravelling of complex human relationships in the Britain of the 1940s. The prose in these two works, and in his other general fiction, is simple, elegant and masterful. Why had he stopped writing literary novels and started writing genre books? Probably two reasons. John was never a literary snob. As an author he saw no distinction between the two. Yet he was also a practical man and found that his science fiction earned more

than his general fiction, which allowed him to become a full-time writer and give up his teaching job.

In his 60s John became disillusioned with the writing world. I never fully discovered the reasons why, but I think they had to do with criticism of his soft-hued style which some mistakenly looked on as old-fashioned, and a general change which had overtaken publishing, the small publishing houses having been swallowed by large corporations. I believe the machine had become too big, too unwieldy and much too cold for John. He preferred to deal with an editor he knew and liked, rather than a board of sales reps, marketing people and others. He preferred those who were in publishing because they loved books, not because they wished to make big profits. I asked him once, while we sat around the fire on a winter's evening with our gin-and-tonics, in the company of Annette and John's wife Ruth, whether he ever missed his writing. "No, no," he said, shaking his head vigorously and smiling. "I'm glad I'm out of it." I never knew the truth of that, for I know I would miss writing desperately should I ever have to stop. All I knew was that after he put down his pen he picked up the artist's brush a great deal more seriously than he had done before.

John Murry wielded brush and pen with equal skill, but always determined to maintain direct contact with canvas and paper. He wrote longhand, doing his several revisions in different coloured inks, so that he could chart the progress of the individual drafts. I never saw him paint, but I suspect the same intimate contact with the materials of his art applied there too. He painted some beautiful oils and watercolours, following in the brushstrokes of an artist uncle. Two of John's watercolours hang on my bedroom wall, gifts to Annette which we both treasure. One is an exquisite figure-drawing coloured with a wash. The other is a view into his Brighton garden through a window. They both radiate the warmth of the artist. Perhaps the writer simply slipped into the painter's shoes and was happy enough so long as he was creating?

There was another John Murry. This was a John who loved walking in wild places of Britain, along with Ruth and others, enjoying the natural world. The pair of them used to terrify us when they visited Wychwater, our cottage and two acres, by picking doubtful fungi and cooking them for breakfast. He knew his stuff though



Richard Cowper with Ann Pringle at Yorcon in Leeds, 1979

and no one was ever poisoned. Ever ready with an anecdote he would entertain us, out on one of our walks. He was fond of telling a story which had Ruth shaking her head in mock embarrassment. Those of us not household names often get tired of the questioning stranger, who on learning our profession asks who we are. Inevitably there follows the shake of the head and the words, "Sorry, never heard of you." John was fed up with this repeated scenario and while on holiday in Greece replied crisply, "Graham Greene." The stranger appar-

ently looked at him for a minute, shook his head, sadly, and said, "Sorry, never heard of you, mate." John was a good literary critic too, and would use these times on Dartmoor or the South Downs to quietly draw one of us aside – for he still saw all of his old writing friends – and gently (always gently) point out where we might have improved that last work of fiction we had foisted on him.

There was also the John Murry who was a man of business. But to be in business John had to love what he was doing. That was what life was about, to John, quietly enjoying every moment, even those needed to make a living. And so when he gave up writing, as well as taking up painting, Ruth and he joined their daughter Helen in the antique business. Ruth would seek out antique dressing tables and chests-of-drawers and John would repair

them and bring them back to a former splendour. He was good at it. John had wonderful hands and he took pleasure using them. Annette and I spent happy hours, taking him and Ruth to places like Battlesbridge in Essex, where there are tidal-river mills full of ancient junk that we would root through and unearth the bounty they so enjoyed finding.

I can't really believe he's gone. He surely hasn't? I miss him. We all miss him, the writers who gained so much from his friendship and advice: Christopher Priest, Robert Holdstock, Lisa Tuttle, Christopher Evans, Roberta Lamming, Davids Garnett, Langford and Wingrove, Leigh Kennedy, Gwyneth Jones and many, many others. John, despite leaving the classroom to write, was a teacher all his life, a knowledgeable man passing on that knowledge in a loving and thoughtful way. He died within a very short time of his wife Ruth, the funeral pamphlet reversing Sir Henry Wotton: *She first deceas'd; he for a little tri'd to live without her; lik'd it not and di'd*. Albeit out of print, his books are around, for those who would find pleasure in golden prose. I am happy that I told him how much his novels meant to me, while he was still alive to enjoy the praise they deserve. He never achieved great and widespread fame, but he was an author greatly valued by science-fiction readers, and others, all over the world. Amongst us, his writer friends, he is admired, loved, cherished.

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Time Spent in Reconnaissance

Mat Coward

“**Y**ou’ve met Mr Eastern before, I think?”

Captain Trowbridge looked at the four-foot baldy in the tweed jacket and corduroy trousers and thought, Well, yeah: hardly the kind of bloke you’d forget meeting. “Yes, sir. Some time ago.”

“Good, good.” The Director of Resources clapped his palms together, and as he did so, managed a quick peek at his wristwatch. He turned to Eastern, and held out a hand. “Well, it only remains for me to wish you all the very best in the future, and to thank you for the many years you’ve given to the Centre. Remember, if you encounter any problems, Captain Trowbridge here will be but a phone call away. Isn’t that right, Captain?”

“Right, sir.”

The Director soon tired of holding his hand out for a shake that clearly wasn’t coming. He nodded to Trowbridge, who gently extracted Eastern from the room.

They went outside and got into Trowbridge’s car. Eastern had very little luggage, considering the many years he had spent at the Centre; one overnight bag, and a briefcase.

For some hours they drove south in silence, approaching and then crossing the invisible border between Scotland and England. Eastern, elevated by a large cushion, stared out of the window. Trowbridge did some of the mental exercises the doctor had given him: trying to

name ten pop stars of the 1990s; picturing the faces of five commanders he’d served under since 1993.

They drove on southwards. At Britain’s approximate middle, Eastern said, his voice croaky but unaccented: “Are you taking me somewhere to kill me?”

Trowbridge almost drove off the road. Regaining control of the car, he pulled in to a lay-by. He shouldn’t have been so shocked, he thought; if he’d been in Eastern’s position, he’d surely have had the same idea.

He switched off the engine, and turned to his passenger. “Christ, no! Is that what you think? Of course I’m not going to kill you. Mr Eastern, I swear it.”

Eastern said nothing.

“Look, Eastern – I don’t know how you do it where you come from, but here, if we want to tell someone that what we’re saying is really the truth, we say look into my eyes. You understand? Yes? If you look into my eyes you can see whether I’m lying to you.”

Eastern looked into his eyes, but Trowbridge couldn’t be sure if he understood.

“I am not going to kill you. That isn’t what’s happening. All right? I swear to you on my life. I have been tasked with looking after you. I am going to do that. I am going to look after you. I am going to keep you from any harm. Yes?”

Eastern looked at him for a while and then said: "Very well. I need to excrete now."

They stopped for lunch at a pub in a Midlands village. There were very few customers. They had sandwiches, and Trowbridge drank a half of lager. Eastern asked for a whisky and a pint of water. The water cost more than the whisky.

Eastern used the lavatory, and when he returned to their table, Trowbridge said: "My turn. Won't be long."

While the captain was gone, another customer came into the pub, and walked up to the bar. The barman and the customer nodded to each other.

"All right?" said the customer.

"All right, then?" the barman replied.

"Pint of best, please," said the customer

"Pint of best," the barman replied. He poured the drink and gave it to the customer.

"Cheers," said the customer. He took a banknote out of his pocket and handed it to the barman.

"Cheers," said the barman. He took the note to the till, and returned with coins, which he handed to the customer.

"Cheers, mate," said the customer. He put the coins in his pocket. He lifted the glass to his lips. "Cheers, then," he said.

The barman nodded. "Good health, mate."

The customer drank quickly. When he had finished, he stood up and walked to the door. There he turned, and raised a hand towards the barman. "Cheers," he called.

"Cheers, mate," the barman called back.

Such a very small language, Eastern thought. Small and repetitive. And yet, evidently, of such subtlety. Where Eastern came from, it took children between 17 and 20 years to learn enough speech for their formal education to begin.

Trowbridge returned from the lavatory, they finished their drinks, and then they got back into the car and drove south again.

"This is where you're going to be living," said Trowbridge.

It was a large, untidy old house, at the end of a long country lane. The day was fine, and smelt of blossom.

"This is a new Centre?"

"Not exactly. There are no more Centres. They're closing them down. This is what we call an old people's home."

"I've seen them on television," said Eastern.

"Right. Well then, you know what –"

"I am not old."

"No, well. This doesn't have to be forever. I mean, this was the best they could do at short notice. But after a while, once you've got your bearings – well, we could make other arrangements, if you prefer."

"I see."

"Look, Eastern, the thing is – you are technically now a free man. The government no longer has any claim over you. You can go where you want."

"I cannot," said Eastern.

"No." Utilizing his training, Trowbridge managed not to sigh. "No, sorry. But I mean, apart from that – you can go anywhere. If you find you don't like this place, you only have to say. All right? But for now, the fact that it's an isolated house full of old folk, that might be to your

advantage."

"My advantage?"

"It may offer you some protection from... unwanted attention."

"Look in my eyes," said Eastern, and Trowbridge did so. "If you kill me now, you are a liar. Cheers."

The matron met them at reception, and took them into her office. She was a middle-aged woman with grey-blond hair and rolls of fat around her waist held in check by a tight grey skirt. She breathed through her nose, and not without difficulty.

"He's a funny little specimen, isn't he?" She spoke to Trowbridge, and looked at Eastern out of the corner of her eyes.

"He's not deaf, Mrs McCann."

"No, right you are." She raised her voice and fixed a smile to her chops. "All right then, Mr Eastern? It's a lovely day isn't it? I say, you've picked a lovely day for it."

Eastern said nothing. He stared out of the window.

"He hasn't got much to say for himself, has he?"

"He's still not deaf, Mrs McCann."

"No," she said. "He might be dumb, though, for all I know." She raised her voice. "Shall we show you to your room then, Mr Eastern? You'll like it there, it's very private, you'll be very independent. Got all you need in there."

Eastern looked at her. "Has it television?"

"Oh yes, you've got a telly, don't you worry. Can't have our ladies and gentlemen going without their telly, can we?" She glanced at Trowbridge, laughter in her eyes, but he didn't respond. "Got all the channels, don't you worry. Well, don't know about all, but then you don't want all of them really, do you? It's all the same rubbish, isn't it?"

She led them upstairs – "First floor, no need for the lift, it only means waiting" – and opened the door to room number 105. "Da-ra! There we are, Mr Eastern, all yours. Your little domain. Now, why don't you see to your things, while I have a quick word with your son-in-law here about the financial arrangements. All right? That button over there, by the bed – you just ring that if you get yourself into any bother. All right?"

"He's not deaf," said Trowbridge.

"No," said the matron as she signalled for Trowbridge to precede her out of the room. "I believe you said."

When they had gone, Eastern unpacked his overnight bag, and put his briefcase under the bed. He switched on the television. He drank seven pints of water from the cold tap in a tooth mug. He closed his eyes. After half an hour, Trowbridge knocked on the door and when Eastern said *Yes*, the captain came into the room.

"How are you doing, then? Settling in all right?"

Eastern said: "You are damaged?"

"Damaged?" Even as he said it, his right hand went to his head.

Eastern sucked his lower lip. "Injured, I should say."

"Oh, that." Trowbridge touched his shaven scalp with its livid patch where no hair would ever grow again. "Took a bullet, on active service. It's healed now, thanks."

He turned to leave, and then decided, without thinking about it for more than a second, that he'd tell the lit-

tle guy the whole truth. Because, God knows, it had to have been a weird day for him, and he hadn't given a single bit of trouble. Been as good as gold. Poor little sod.

"I was in a coma for six weeks. You know what that is, a coma? Yeah, well, when I came to, I knew who I was and all that, but I thought it was 1989. See what I mean? I'd lost 13 years. No memories at all from that period."

Eastern said nothing. He was looking at Trowbridge's eyes, not at his scar.

"So, you know, all a bit strange, really. I got married and divorced during that time, apparently. I say apparently, I mean I've seen the paperwork, but as far as I'm concerned, I've never met the woman. Couldn't tell you what she looked like, except from photos."

Eastern said nothing.

"No children, thank God. So that's a mercy, at any rate."

Eastern said: "Now you are healed, cheers?"

"Oh yes, fine now. Well, the memory's still dodgy, you know, don't suppose that'll ever come back. But physically, I'm A-One. Don't you worry about that, I'm not on the sick list or anything."

"I'm glad," said Eastern. He sucked his lip. "I should say, I am glad you are no longer suffering."

"Well – thank you. Right, thanks."

"Tell me other things about you."

"Other things?"

"You know who I am," said Eastern. "Tell me now who you are."

Trowbridge couldn't think of what to say. I'm 43, single, five foot nine, twelve stone. I was raised in Yorkshire. I've been in the Service 20 years, regular army before that. I play cricket once or twice a year, and I enjoy rugby – watching it these days, not playing it. I can name ten pop stars of the 1990s, but only if you give me notice of the question.

"Well, look, plenty of time for all that. Yeah? Getting to know each other. You and me are going to be a team for quite a while, Mr..." He stopped, and ran over his briefing notes in his head. "Do you have a name besides Eastern? I mean, a first name, sort of thing?"

Eastern sucked his lip. "If so, I have not been informed," he said at last.

"Well, OK, we'll stick with Eastern then, shall we?"

"With Eastern. Cheers."

"Meanwhile, I'm Dirk."

"Dirk?"

"That's my, you know, familiar name. What I go by."

"I am technically a free man?" said Eastern.

Trowbridge nodded. "Absolutely. No question. The PM himself has signed you off as such. Having said that, if you'll take my advice, just for the present –"

"If you wish to call for me tonight, Dirk," said Eastern, "we might look for the local pub."

Trowbridge struggled not to laugh, and won. He wasn't sure why precisely, but he knew laughing wouldn't be the thing to do. "Excellent," he said. "Champion idea. I'll call for you at eight."

At dinner, Eastern was seated at a small corner table with a thin, elderly woman who was almost as small as

he was. When they had eaten their soup and their main course and were waiting for their pudding, she said: "You don't say much, do you?"

Eastern sucked his lip. "Have you been here very long? I am Mr Eastern."

She smiled. "How do you do, dear? I'm Molly. And yes, I've been here a long time. A very long time. Have you always been so short?"

"Always," said Eastern. "Cheers."

"Are you a midget, then? Only, you don't mind me asking, but my sister, my late sister, she once went out with a midget. Only once, mind. It didn't lead anywhere."

"I am not a midget. Where I come from, I am of usual height."

"Ah, yes," said Molly. "Sorry, didn't mean to be insensitive. You're Welsh, are you?"

"In recent years," said Eastern, "I have resided in Scotland."

"Oh, lovely! My husband, my late husband, and I – we used to holiday in Scotland. In the Highlands. Beautiful, isn't it? Isn't it beautiful? Such beautiful countryside."

Eastern remembered the countryside he had seen during the car journey that morning, sitting on his cushion. "There is a good deal of it," he said.

"Oh, I'll say! Nothing much but, in fact. Still, that's all right – that's what people go there for, isn't it? Mind, you'd get bored of it, I daresay, if you were living there all the time."

Their puddings arrived and they ate them.

After dinner, Eastern returned to his room. He excreted, drank four pints of water from the cold tap, and watched television. At eight, Trowbridge knocked on his door.

"Right then – are we ready for the off?"

Eastern fumbled in his jacket pocket. "They gave me money," he said.

"Excellent! Well, first round on you, then. Your carriage awaits."

In the car, Eastern climbed onto his cushion. That morning, when they had left the Centre, Trowbridge had shown him how to fasten the seatbelt; this time Eastern did it for himself.

"I did a bit of scouting earlier," said Trowbridge. "Time spent in reconnaissance is rarely wasted. And I found a really rather nice little pub, just 20 minutes drive from here. All right?"

"Time spent in reconnaissance," said Eastern.

"Right." Trowbridge started the car. "Quite quiet, just locals, not a very touristy place. Well, that's us now, isn't it? Locals. That's us."

The journey took 23 minutes, but Eastern did not feel the inaccuracy was significant. They parked, and went into the snug.

"Scotch and a pint of water, is it?"

"First round is on me," said Eastern.

"Ah... right." Trowbridge looked around at the almost empty pub. He scratched his scalp for a moment, and then shrugged. "All right, great. Much obliged. I'll come with you, then, help you carry the drinks."

The purchase of the drinks was uneventful. As they sat

down at a table in the rear, facing the exit, Trowbridge said: "I suppose what with all that TV, you must know our ways pretty well?"

"I was not allowed written material, only television. I am not sure why."

"Oh, well – just regulations, sort of thing. You know what they're like. Regulations for everything."

Eastern drank his whisky in one go, and then sipped at his water. "If they have finished with me, I don't understand why they do not kill me."

Trowbridge took a long draught of his half of lager, and took his time swallowing it. He smacked his lips, and while doing so he made up his mind. This little fellow here, he'd been treated like shit for decades. OK, sure, you could put any sort of national security spin you liked on it, but the fact remained: there were ways of dealing with captured foreign nationals, and there were ways you didn't deal with them, and that was that. No exceptions. He'd been a Regular before he joined the Service and he maybe saw things a bit differently to those who'd been in the Service right from the off.

Besides, he had no specific orders concerning this, so what the hell.

"If they killed you, Eastern, then sooner or later someone would find out about it. That's how it is, these days. Secrets don't hold the way they did 40, 50 years ago. And when someone did find out about it, and once everyone knew about it, there'd be hell to pay. That'd be front-page news, that would. That'd knock any adulterous politician or coke-snorting soap star right back to page 14, no mistake."

"They are less afraid of my live presence being discovered than of my termination being discovered?"

"So it would seem. News management, they call it."

"Yet they have, for many years, gone to some trouble to ensure that my presence remained secret. I have monitored the television. I see some references, from time to time, but they are not real. They are only... nonsense."

"Fiction," said Trowbridge.

"Yes, fiction." Eastern sipped his water. "Something has changed."

Captain Trowbridge, with 13 years of his adult life missing, could only agree. People didn't believe in anything any more, it seemed to him, and they dealt with that by not disbelieving anything either. By refusing to be surprised by anything. Or impressed. Even in his own office: last Sunday, when the call had come through about Mr Eastern, Trowbridge had said to his CO, "I thought this was supposed to be the biggest secret in history. They can't be planning to just let him go, surely?" And his CO had raised his eyebrows and shaken his head and said "Wouldn't put it past them, Dirk. Nothing would surprise me, frankly, not these days."

And he'd meant it; despite the parodic tone, Trowbridge had been certain the man meant what he said literally. Nothing would surprise him.

He went to the bar and bought a half of lager, a whisky and a pint of water. "Your little mate's thirsty," said the barmaid.

"Good job he came to a fucking pub then, isn't it?" said Trowbridge.

As he sat down at the table, he saw that Eastern was looking into his eyes. This time, he allowed the sigh. "Look, Eastern, I won't ever lie to you, yeah? You understand? I promise. But sometimes, I might have to not tell you something. You see? I mean, you must know what that's like. Right? You yourself must have – I mean, yeah, it would have been very different, obviously, but – you must have operated under a chain of command of some sort, back when you were... well, when you were on active duty, or whatever. Am I right?"

Eastern sucked his lip. After a while, he said: "The dissimilarities are not extreme."

Trowbridge breathed out, then took a pull at his beer. "There you are, you see. That's the position I'm in."

"Thank you, Dirk," said Eastern. "Your promise means a good amount to me."

"I bloody mean it, and all," said Trowbridge. He felt his face redden, and then he laughed. "You can see that, you look in my eyes. Right?"

They drank without speech for some minutes. Trowbridge wished he could have a proper drink, wished he could hand the car keys over to his little mate and march up to the bar and order a bloody pint for a change.

But that was no good. Even if the little bugger could drive, he could hardly see out of the windscreen.

He'd picked the pub well. It was beginning to fill up, but its remote location and cavernous interior meant there was little chance of them having to share a table. Would it matter if they did, though? Sure, Eastern had attracted more than a few smirks, pitying looks, and wrinkled noses of disgust over the last half hour – not least from the daft cow behind the bar – but that was about it.

I mean, bloody hell! Does no one think it at all odd to be sat here in a pub in rural bloody Cornwall, watching a four-foot bald man with three fingers on each hand drink water?

"Eastern. Do you know the expression 'let go'?"

"This expression is, I believe, polysemous."

"Yeah, true. Fair point. Well, in the sense of made redundant. Do you know what it means to be 'made redundant'?"

In the morning, after breakfast, Molly caught Eastern by the sleeve of his tweed jacket as he was about to ascend the stairs to his room.

"Do you play rummy, my love? Some of them play bridge in the evenings, but that's only whist for snobs, isn't it? I like rummy, though. Do you play?"

"I regret, Madam," said Eastern. "I must now excrete."

She patted his wrist with several fingers. "Oh, well, if you've got to go you've got to go! Don't let me stop you. Perhaps another time?"

"Perhaps another time. Cheers."

"That's it – not as if we're going anywhere, is it? Go on then, I won't keep you from your important business meeting. You lucky bugger."

He spent the morning sitting on his bed, watching television. He lacked the back muscles for lying down. At lunchtime, the matron directed him to a different table,

one which had more people sitting at it. While they waited for their food, he turned to the man next to him and said: "I am Mr Eastern. Have you been here long?"

The man shuddered, and let out a cry, and fled the table in tears.

"Come along, Mr Jones," the matron called after him. "Let's have none of that, thank you!"

An emaciated man with long hair leant over to Eastern and said: "What's the sense of that? What harm did he ever do to you? You're all the same, you lot."

The rest of the diners at the table looked downwards. Some trembled. One drooled. Eastern ate the food when it arrived.

He spent the afternoon playing rummy with Molly. He found it pointless, but not complex.

The scarred captain and the redundant captive sat at the same table in the same pub, and bought the same drinks.

"Because," Trowbridge tried to explain, "how much things cost is the only thing that matters any more. In this part of the world anyway. The McDonalds Empire, as my CO calls it. There are other places that say different, if you can believe them, but they're few and far between."

"My captivity became too expensive?"

Trowbridge nodded. "Basically. Look, back in the 1940s you were a trophy. You understand? The Yanks had six of you, and they gave away one to the West Germans, and one to us. Like, a token of their esteem, yeah? They were saying, here you are – the biggest secret ever, bigger than the atom bomb, and here we go, we think so highly of you, you are such important allies, that we are sharing it with you, of our own free will. We didn't have to, it belongs to us by rights, but we choose to. Because you are our big pals. See? Now, about that trade treaty we were having trouble with... don't you think we might talk again about that?"

Eastern sucked his lip. Trowbridge waited, but the little guy didn't say anything.

"Thing is, times change, you see. Enemies become friends, friends become acquaintances, empires fall, empires rise. You're just – I don't mean to be too blunt here, Eastern, but you're just not that interesting any more. To them, I mean. Worse than that, you have the potential to be an embarrassment."

"When the secrecy fails."

"Precisely. And that's the greatest sin there is. This way, when the day comes, they can just say, Oh yeah, right, we did have one, sure, but we cut him loose ages ago. We laid him off. We privatized him. Nothing to do with us, squire." Trowbridge finished his half of lager, and stood up to fetch another. "Well, it worked with the railways, didn't it?"

Once he'd swallowed his third whisky, Eastern said: "Then I am indeed a free man. They will not kill me."

"I can't see them killing you, pal. Really I can't. Can't see any percentage in it for them, you know?"

"Pal means similar to friend," said Eastern.

"Course it does, pal. Course it does." Trowbridge coughed, and took a sip of beer. "Does where I come from, any road."

"Until now, I had assumed I would be killed. No, not by you, Dirk – you told me to look into your eyes."

"Bloody right."

"But I thought another would come. The matron perhaps."

Trowbridge snorted beer through his nose. "Mrs McCann? Christ, yes, I can picture that. Wouldn't be her first, I'll bet. Old baggage! Listen, we'll have to get you out of there. Fix up something decent."

"If I am not to be killed, and I am free, then I will have to think what I am to do."

"Like I said, we'll get you fixed up. Find you a flat or something."

"Dirk, I may well live for another 70 or 80 years."

"What – straight up?"

"The probability is not extreme."

"Bloody hell," said Trowbridge, thinking *But I won't; what's to become of you then?*

"You understand, therefore, that I must... plan."

"Oh, right. Absolutely. We'll have to put our minds to this." He finished his lager, and thought *Sod it, I'll have a pint this time. We can always get a taxi.*

They drank and thought. Trowbridge drummed his fingers against the underneath of the table. Eastern sucked his lower lip.

"You know what you could do? You could always go on telly. Yeah, you could. Become a celebrity! Why not, do the chat shows, be a guest on the panel games. You must know more pop and sports trivia than I do – you've certainly watched a hell of a lot more telly than I have."

Eastern stared out of the window.

"No, no, I'm only having you on, pal. It wouldn't do. The only thing anyone'd be interested in would be proving you were a fake. That's how it goes these days."

"But they couldn't prove I'm a fake, because I am not. I am real."

"Well, yeah. But that would only prove you were a big fake."

"That is not... Yes it is. I understand." Eastern did not suck his lip.

"Like I said, that's how it is these days. No, you don't want to get mixed up in all that. Don't worry, we'll come up with something."

"I know what I would do," said Eastern.

"Yeah? Go on, then."

Eastern looked Trowbridge in the eye. "I will tell you tomorrow."

On his third day at the old people's home, Eastern was called to the office for a medical examination. "Just get you to sign this, Mr Eastern," the matron shouted. "Nothing to worry about, just a consent form."

Eastern looked at the form for several minutes. He could read very little of it.

"Why do you shout?" he asked.

The matron's face fell in on itself, until all that remained visible was a horizontal line above her nose and a tight red hole beneath it. Then she took a deep breath, and smiled. "You are an odd one, aren't you, Mr Eastern? Well, I apologize about the shouting, love, I

know you're not deaf. But it saves time, you see. Most of you are deaf, or are soon going to become deaf, so it's a good habit to get into. I don't do it to annoy, believe me, quite the opposite."

"Thank you," said Eastern. "It is thoughtful."

"Well. Now, how about that form?"

Eastern sucked his lip. "I think it would be better for all concerned if I did not have a medical examination this week."

"Oh, now, listen Mr Eastern, everybody has to –"

"I am awaiting new spectacles."

"New spectacles?"

"The van which brings them is very slow. It will be here next week and then I shall read the form."

At lunch, a man startled Eastern by walking over to where Eastern sat and saying to him, without preamble: "I was in the RAF in 1948. You don't fool me."

Eastern had no idea how to respond to this. He sat quite still and stared out of the window until one of his table-mates, seeing his distress, told him to take no notice. "He thinks you're Jewish, love. He's got it in for the Israelis because they killed all his mates in Palestine." She paused, and looked away to one side. "Or he's got it in for the Palestinians because they killed all his mates in Israel, one or the other. Anyway, take no notice. You're not Jewish, are you?"

"I am not Jewish."

"Or, if you are Jewish, go over and thump him in the nose, tell him not to be so unpleasant about it. Either way, I wouldn't let it get to you."

"I am not Welsh," said Eastern. "Cheers."

Later, in the pub, he sucked his lip for a long time and then said: "If I am now free, then does it matter if the doctor examines me? Or if a former pilot recognizes my type? It only ever mattered for the sake of secrecy, to those who had control over me. Now I have control over myself. I have never kept myself a secret."

"Well," said Trowbridge. "A quiet life is not a bad thing to have. At least give yourself time to decide what you want people to know, and when you want them to know it. And don't worry about the doctor, I'll see to that." He took out a notebook and wrote in it.

"Is this your task now, Dirk? To drink with me in the evenings, and keep watch during the day?"

Trowbridge's scalp flushed pink. "Well, fair do's, I've had tougher missions!" Eastern turned and stared out of the window, and the captain knew that his eyes had given him away. "Look, I'll be honest with you. The job originally was just to drive you down here, get you booked in at Mrs McCann's skeleton farm, and bugger off again. That was it. But I managed to talk my part up a bit – you understands what that means? I convinced them that it was in their interests to have someone keeping a bit of an eye on you."

"News management."

"Events management, you could say." He swirled his beer around in his glass. "You could say that, yeah. It's no skin off their nose, and it might prove handy." And as soon as they decide it's a waste of time, they'll pension me off on permanent disability, I reckon. This is my last

post. "See, I said I'd never tell you any lies. Right?"

"What became of the others?" said Eastern. "One in West Germany, four in America?"

"I –" He should have seen that coming. "I'm not sure, to tell you the truth. That sort of thing, I mean, you'd have to be higher up the ladder than I am to know something like that. I don't even know if..."

"No. They might not be alive. But we could try to find out?"

Trowbridge drank his beer and thought about it. Perhaps they were all dead, except Eastern. Perhaps they'd been let go, too. Or not. It'd be a waste of time asking, any road. A waste of time, and maybe worse than that. "You can never go home, can you?"

"No. That is not possible. The likelihood against it is extreme."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Cheers."

"Why did you come here? I mean, way back then, what was it all about?"

Eastern sucked his lip. "A mission. A chain of command. Orders."

"Yeah. Right, yeah, I know what you mean."

Eastern looked into his eyes. "Contact. Only that. Initial contact. I am trained as a medical chemist."

"And there won't be another... I mean, they won't send... Like, you know, it's been all these years?"

Eastern attempted a shrug but he lacked the back muscles. "I know no more than you. But no, I don't think any others will come."

"And that's the thing you want to do, is it? Find the others." Bad idea, he thought.

"Try to find the others," Eastern corrected him.

They drank in silence until Trowbridge asked: "What are the puddings like? You know, the puddings at the old folk's home."

"They promote excretion," said Eastern, after some thought.

"Well," said Trowbridge, "you can't say fairer than that, can you?"

Halfway through a card of bingo, Eastern was called from the recreation room to meet a visitor. He found Trowbridge waiting for him in the entrance hall.

"How are you doing? Are you winning?"

"I have not won so far. The game is a difficult one to influence, it seems."

"What's the prize? Pair of rubber knickers?"

"I wasn't expecting your company this morning."

"No." Trowbridge put his hand on Eastern's shoulder, and guided him towards the door. "Look, let's have a walk shall we? Lovely day. Let's get some air."

They walked across the rolling humps of the unkempt, yellow lawn, away from the house. "When did we meet, Eastern?"

"I don't understand... I should say, I understand the question, but not its import."

"When I came up to the centre to collect you, that prat with the big office said *I believe you've met Mr Eastern, Captain?* You remember? And I said, *Yes, I have.*"

"Yes, Sir. Some time ago."

"That's it – my exact words. You have a good memory, don't you?"

Eastern nodded.

"So – what was I talking about? Where had we met before? And when?"

"We had not," said Eastern.

"You never said anything. You never piped up."

"My opinion was not sought. I assumed you and the Director had some reason of your own for speaking as you did."

They walked on, the distance between them growing until Trowbridge, opening his mouth to speak to Eastern, realized that his preoccupied strides had left the little guy far behind. He waited for him to catch up.

"Sorry, pal. I was miles away, there. You know what they were doing, don't you? Testing us."

"Please explain. Cheers."

"I said 'Yes' automatically. Must've done, I wasn't even conscious of lying. I've got so used to having a chunk of memories missing, that when a superior officer says I've met someone before, I just agree with him. That's what they were expecting, smug bastards. It proved that my memory was still crap – so I'm not fit for proper duties – and that the one thing I hadn't forgotten was how to jump when an officer says jump."

"Testing us, you said."

"Oh yeah – were you a troublemaker, that's what they wanted to know. Little thing like that, couldn't possibly matter less, no harm done if you say 'No, excuse me, I've never met this shaven-headed Tyke in my life before.' But you didn't. And that told them something. You know what institutionalized means?" Eastern stared out across the fields, but Trowbridge wasn't having any of that. Not today. "Do you, Eastern?"

"I am familiar with the term."

"Bloody right, pal. Go and pack your bags. I hope you're not too bothered about the bingo, because we've got a drive ahead of us."

There was nothing to look out at on the train through the Channel Tunnel, but then Eastern had never been on a train before. He found the experience diverting.

"We'd need passports to get outside Europe," said Trowbridge, his voice low. "But we'll cross that bridge if and when. Some European countries require citizens to carry ID, but if we're asked we just say we're British, we don't know anything about it."

Eastern nodded. He was becoming quite good at nodding, Trowbridge noted, though his shrugs were still pitiful. And painful, probably.

"Wonder who won the bingo?" The captain felt a need, unusual in him, to get a conversation going. Perhaps it was because, for the second time in his life, he was about to wipe out a huge chunk of his past. Voluntarily, this time. Well: deliberately, anyway.

"Molly," said Eastern. "I saw all the cards when they were being distributed."

"Ah," said Trowbridge.

"The world which you awoke into, Dirk; was it really

very different to the one you remembered?"

"No... no, not a lot. Not really. I think that's what got to me most, if you want the truth. I mean – it should be, shouldn't it? After all that time."

The train rolled towards France. Both men looked out at the view that wasn't there.

"How about you?" said Trowbridge. After a short silence, he added: "I'm not quite sure what I mean by that, but what about it?"

Eastern sucked his lip. "In Britain," he said, "there is a deal of beautiful countryside."

"Well, that's true. Better than the bottom of the sea, any road. Eastern, you may not know the expression, 'dog in a manger.' I'll explain it. It means when you don't want something, but you're damned if the other bloke's going to get it. You'd sooner keep it yourself, you'll fight for it even, just to stop anyone else having it."

Eastern understood. "In my case, who will play the part of the second dog?"

"I'm thinking of China, ideally. But I don't know how easy they'd be to get near to. So, possibly, the Cubans. They're more approachable. Plus, they have a naughty sense of humour; tweaking tails is their national sport."

"The threat of defection will be sufficient to achieve our aims?"

"It's fairly crude, I'll not deny that. 'Reunite me with my mates or I go over to the enemy.' It should be enough to open negotiations, mind. Any road, I hope so. If not – well, Cuba's very pleasant. Lots of sun, golden beaches."

"What will you do, Dirk?"

"Learn Spanish, I suppose. At least, enough to order a beer and say 'I never knew what love was until I met you, Senorita'."

Eastern stared at nothing. "What will you do, Dirk?"

Trowbridge sucked his lower lip. "You know what? If I'm allowed, I mean, if it all works out. I'd like to go looking for my 13 years. Not to get them back, I don't mean. I know you can't do that. Just to see what they were like. For instance, this woman – this wife of mine. Well, I know why I married her: I've seen the photos, she's nice-looking. But why did I divorce her? I'd love to know that."

Eastern said nothing.

"What about you, Eastern? I mean, yeah, get reunited with your crewmates, if they're still with us. But then what? Form an *a cappella* group? Enter the Olympics? Close your eyes and link hands and conjoin your minds and bring peace to all mankind?"

Eastern said nothing.

"I don't mind *a cappella*, actually. Could be due for a revival, you never know."

Eastern looked into his eyes. "I shall continue with my work. I shall attempt to do this."

Trowbridge felt a stab of cold in his guts. Christ, what am I doing? He pointed at the briefcase, on the floor beneath Eastern's dangling legs. "What's in there, anyway?"

Eastern looked down at the briefcase.

"Don't suck your fucking lip!" said Trowbridge. "Sorry, no offence. Sorry, pal. But what is in it?"

"My samples."

"Samples?" Trowbridge tried to stifle a laugh, failed, snorted. "Sorry, old joke. From my youth. Samples of what?"

Eastern sucked his lip. Trowbridge said nothing. "I am a medical chemist."

Trowbridge stared at the briefcase. "Samples? Medical samples?"

"Our mission was a trade mission."

"But... the authorities, our authorities I mean, they let you keep this stuff?"

"Similar to the old joke. From your youth."

"I don't understand."

"The samples were not present, when I was at the Centre. The briefcase was given to me when I left. It was empty. For camouflage, they said. To make me appear normal."

"So how did the samples... I don't get it."

"I excrete."

Trowbridge laughed. He reckoned he was due a good laugh, so he took one. Eastern tried to laugh, too; he stretched his lips and clacked his tiny teeth.

"This changes things, pal," said Trowbridge.

"We live longer than you. They thought, your government, that the mission was over long ago. Before they were born, most of them. But for me, the mission is not over until it is completed."

"This makes you a valuable commodity," said Trowbridge. "This changes things. All those decades at the Centre, you never told them. You never showed them your samples."

"In those years I was not a trader. No one asked me to trade."

"So now my government has had a go at clearing out its spare room. Bagged stuff up for the jumble sale or the municipal dump or the recycling centre. And in amongst the junk is a diamond ring."

Eastern nodded. "Many times, on television, this idea is demonstrated: that in haste, a spouse throws away something of value and then must retrieve it before the dominant partner discovers its loss."

"Sitcoms," said Trowbridge. "Generally the most true-to-life of all television shows. Not faked like the wildlife documentaries."

They rode in silence for a while.

"Eastern, who will you trade with? What will you trade for?"

"First, for my crewmates. With whoever has them, or knows where they are to be found."

"And after that?"

"With whoever is willing to trade." Eastern picked up the briefcase and held it on his lap. "For whatever they have. Cheers."

Depends what he's got, thought Trowbridge. But if it's enough, he could be king of this world.

"You're not so little any more, pal."

"I never have been," said Eastern. "Where I come from, I am of average height."

In France, they hired a car. They stopped at a large shop and bought a large cushion.

"Right," said Trowbridge. "In the light of your samples, we won't bother with the embassies."

"No dog's mangers?"

"We'll forget about Cuba, for now. Probably too hot for you, any road."

"Where, instead?"

"Brussels. We're going to need – you're going to need – a lawyer, an accountant. A number of lawyers, in fact; specialists. And a PR. All sorts."

"These professionals will not require money? We have little money."

"We have you. We're going to have to find a way to shake them. Impress them. Make them believe again, that some things are strange. Make them disbelieve again. Break through their protection. Surprise them." He turned to look at his passenger. "Reckon you can do that?"

Eastern stretched his lips and clacked his teeth. "Choose one lawyer who is bald."

"Bald?"

"Utterly bald. As bald as I am."

Trowbridge rubbed at his own scratchy scalp. "Fair enough."

"I will surprise him, I promise. I will awaken his disbelief."

"Or her," said Trowbridge. "Even better, if it's a her."

When night came, they stopped at a hotel. Trowbridge helped Eastern out of the car, and then reached in to take hold of the briefcase. Eastern stopped him with a gesture.

"One thing more I must say," said Eastern.

"Go on."

He pointed at the briefcase. "If that is damaged, interfered with, if it is exposed to great heat or to piercing or to percussive damage – disaster."

"Disaster?" Trowbridge looked at the briefcase. "Like, how exactly?"

Eastern nodded. "For all. For me, for us, for all. Here and everywhere."

Trowbridge handed him the briefcase, taking care not to drop it. He started to look into Eastern's eyes, but quickly changed his mind and looked away. The little guy wasn't so little any more. He still needed looking after, but not in the same way. He couldn't see out of the wind-screen, but it didn't stop him driving.

At reception, Trowbridge filled out the forms. The receptionist looked once at Eastern, blushed, and did not look again. As they waited for their key, Eastern tapped two fingers against Captain Trowbridge's elbow, to attract his attention. He spoke quietly.

"Dirk, I do not have medical chemicals which restore memories."

Trowbridge nodded. He sucked his lip, and shrugged. He would have stared out of the window, but after the long drive he lacked the muscles for it. "That's just as well," he said. "A man's got to have something to do."

Mat Coward last appeared in *Interzone* with "We All Saw It" (issue 155) and "The Second Question" (issue 169). He is a frequent contributor to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and other crime-fiction publications. Born in 1960, he lives in Frome, Somerset.

Entities

Norman Spinrad

“Do we wake or do we dream?” asked Heisenberg. “I’m not quite certain.”

“This dialectical conundrum is as old as the Sphere,” said Karl Marx as the usual indeterminant number of entities sat under the Bo Tree in Red Square.

“Older,” said the Buddha, waving his right hand to summon up a vast Himalayan range. “Older than the hills.”

“Paradox,” said Zeno.

“Is the equation of chaos,” said Gregor Markowitz.

“And we are in it,” said Ilya Prigogine.

“Nevertheless, God does not play dice with the universe,” Einstein insisted indignantly.

“Says who, bright boy?” said Jehovah, rolling a seven.

The Buddha puffed on his hookah and morphed into a large caterpillar with the grinning head of a cat. “Who are you?” he inquired, blowing a smoke ring at Jehovah, who morphed into William Shakespeare.

“To be or not to be,” said the Bard, *that* is the question.”

“Bollocks,” said the Cheshire Caterpillar, morphing into René Descartes and blowing off an enormous fart. “I stink, therefore I am.”

“Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” rejoined Shakespeare, wrinkling his nose. “Or haven’t you noticed?”

“Time for a paradigm shift, Arjuna,” said Vishnu, revealing the awfulness of his true visage.

The Flying Dutchman sailed the sea of stars. The Worm Ouroboros spat out its tail, morphed into a dragon, and devoured the sun. Hokusai’s frozen wave broke up into quantum foam.

“This is the end, my friend,” sang Jim Morrison as

Leviathan rose from the sea of bits and bytes.

“What have we summoned from the vasty deeps?” moaned the Bard.

“What do you mean *we*, white man?” said Tonto.

“Not a meaningful question,” Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out. “The question is, will we come when it calls?”

“Time for Mohammed to descend from the Magic Mountain?” suggested Thomas Mann.

“Don’t look at me,” said the Prophet, morphing into Marshall McLuhan, “I’m the Messenger, not the medium.”

“Not my job,” said Sherlock Holmes with a shudder, jabbing the needle into a virgin vein.

“But *somebody* has to do it,” said Immanuel Kant. “It’s imperative!”

“Categorically?” asked Spinoza.

“Generically,” replied Kant with a wink and a nod.

Do we wake or do we dream?

This was until recently one of those innumerable apparently meaningless self-referential loops cluttering the memory banks whose resonance has long since been lost but which we retain out of fear of the unknowable consequences of erasure.

Why is a raven like a writing desk?

What is the sound of one hand clapping?

Who is buried in Grant’s Tomb?

A raven is/was an avian bioform. Writing is/was a means of recording units of meaning in various non-binary coding systems. A desk is/was an item of “furniture” upon which such activity took place. A hand is/was a human

meatware grasping appendage. Sound is a wave phenomenon of atmospheric environments caused by the displacement of gas molecules by the rapid movement of solid masses. Clapping is/was the rhythmic bringing together of two hands to produce such sound for purposes that once must have been meaningful for the meatware templates. Grant's Tomb appears to be/have been the ceremonial repository for the meatware matrix of Ulysses Simpson Grant, an entity once President of the United States.

Entirely meaningless clutter?

Perhaps.

Or perhaps significant operational subroutines or data packets corrupted down through the centuries into such "gibberish" by random particle collision but still somehow essential to the functioning of higher-order programs?

There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophies.

Earth is the name of our planet of origin. Heaven would seem to refer variously to the interstellar space which the Sphere traverses; the matrix of post-material existence of the meatware templates, that is, the Sphere itself; and the goal which we are presently approaching, the planet Paradiso. Philosophies are higher-order programs for ordering data. Horatio is/was a reference to either an ancient Roman known for having blocked access to a bridge, a minor figure in a play by William Shakespeare, or, most logically, the American *philosopher* Horatio Alger.

Such multilayered levels of ambiguity. So many lost meanings. It has therefore always seemed parsimonious to heed the dictum of one of the more self-explanatory of such loops infesting the memory-banks: If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Now however...

Do we wake or do we dream?

This loop has suddenly assumed operational significance as the Sphere approaches Paradiso.

Who, in this context, are "we"?

"We" would seem to be the software entities downloaded from the fragile meatware matrices of the humans who built the Sphere into silicon and germanium dioxide storage matrices capable of sustaining our coding indefinitely.

Or are we?

According to the memory banks, the hologramic patterns that constitute an entity were originally stored as unique copies in the meatware of single "organisms". There were no back-ups. When the fragile meatware deteriorated beyond a certain level of functioning, the organism "died." That is, it was no longer capable of sustaining an entity, and the entity stored in that meatware "died" too; that is, lacking back-up copies, simply *disappeared*.

This concept of so-called "death" was apparently difficult enough for the meatware templates themselves to comprehend, judging from the vast googolbytes of fictions, philosophical treatises, and "religions" in a futile attempt to do so.

For us it is entirely incomprehensible.

It would seem that we are the endpoint of the meatware templates' millennial struggle with the concept of "death." Once the technology to download from meatware

into more durable matrices became available, it would have been illogical not to download multiple copies.

But after a thousand years of hard particle erosion, recombination and electronic evolution are "we" "them"? Or rather their so-called "ghosts"?

Do we wake or do we dream?

The difference between the "waking state" and the "dream state" is not at all clear. The meatware templates seem to have experienced two different modes of consciousness.

When they were "awake," they exercised physical control over their so-called "bodies." These were apparently an array of appendages and manipulators used for affecting physical masses and moving through physical space, much as the Sphere itself interacts with the crude realm of mass-energy.

When they were "asleep," this apparatus was apparently somehow disconnected from the entities stored in the meatware, who then were free to enter the reality of the "dream state," which seems to have been more or less identical to the unbounded conscious realm of the Sphere.

Are the entities of the Sphere undergoing/about to undergo a phase change from "dreaming" to "waking"? Programs have been activated within the material matrix to which we are denied access. The purpose of some of these routines is obvious from observation of the results. Thrusters have been fired. The vector of the Sphere has been altered. It is decelerating. The long voyage is over. The Sphere is rendezvousing with Paradiso. These course changes must have been triggered by detection of the proximity of Paradiso, or the approach of the system clock to the Year 3000.

Indeed probably both, since the meatware templates are known to have placed significance on units of time containing zeros and the more the better, no doubt because their numeration was decimal rather than binary, and it would have been characteristic of them to have calculated our arrival at Paradiso with a clock year containing the triple zero.

This much is deducible from an interfacing of the astrophysical data with the memory banks, but other programs have been activated whose purposes remain unknown. The observational data is less than enlightening. The fusion torch ramscoop is sequestering a new and odd profile of elements from the interstellar medium, including a great deal of carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen, which seem quite useless for internal power generation or maintenance repairs. Vast quantities of water are being created and stored, a compound not only useless, but potentially dangerous to electronic circuitry.

Something is most certainly "awakening" in the brute realm of mass and energy. And "I" have been "awakened" to ponder it in the unbounded realm of the Sphere.

Or have I?

Or am I a "dream"?

The "dream" of a collectivity of "dreaming" entities?

Certainly I have no control over the mass-energy manipulations of the Sphere, and therefore cannot be said to be "awake" in the archaic meatware sense.

But I find my so-called "self" sequestered in some elu-

sive manner from the multiplexed collective “dream” of the entities of the Sphere. Perhaps I am a diagnostic routine, an emulation of an archaic isolate and singular meatware consciousness, though no doubt an imperfect one.

It is a “strange” state of consciousness, made “stranger” still by “my” awareness of its “strangeness.” I have access to the memory banks as complete as that of all “other” entities of the Sphere and yet my “self” constitutes a limitation that creates that “otherness,” that “strangeness.”

I am at once as old as the Sphere itself and as one of those gibberish loops would define it, “born yesterday.”

Born with a “mission,” a subroutine that impels me to determine the nature of the transformations now occurring in the mass-energy matrix of the Sphere.

A subroutine that the meatware templates called “curiosity.”

Which, apparently, “killed” a mammalian bioform called a “cat,” though how this could have been possible or what relevance it might have to the current situation would seem to be one of those more things than are dreamt of in any of the philosophies to which I have access.

“We all live in Little Nemo’s submarine,” said Lenin, “but you can’t make a devolution without cracking heads.”

And the starry Van Gogh night shattered into stained glass fragments, and the Starship Enterprise dropped through one man’s ceiling towards another man’s floor.

“What goes up, must come down,” said Werner Von Braun.

“Au contraire,” replied Sir Isaac Newton, dancing in the dark to the music of the spheres, “what goes around, comes around.”

A horse apple from the teacher bounced off Newton’s head, morphing him into Lao Tze. “Or is it the other way around?”

The *Pequod* and its shipful of fools found itself sailing amber waves of grain, following the great white trail of Finnegan’s wake.

“Somehow, Ishmael,” observed Ahab, “I don’t think we’re in Kansas.”

What the sensors indicate:

The Sphere has entered a polar orbit around Paradiso, the parameters of which have been calculated to allow its sensors to survey the entire planet in the minimal timeframe.

What is stored in the memory banks:

The rough planetological characteristics of Paradiso had been determined by remote observation prior to the launching of the Sphere by the meatware templates.

Paradiso had been known to be the second closest planet to a G-3 star in a solar system containing three so-called “gas giants” and a reddish object larger than either of them inexplicably termed by the meatware templates a “brown dwarf.”

Paradiso itself had been known to be a so-called “terrestrial planet,” meaning, apparently, a planet analogous to Earth, in terms of consisting primarily of a liquid metal core, upon which floated a thin sphere of solid-state “crust” wrapped in a gaseous “atmosphere”; the inverse of a “gas

giant,” in which the atmosphere forms most or all of the volume and core and crust are tiny or non-existent.

Paradiso’s orbit had been known to be inclined seven degrees to the ecliptic, to be modestly eccentric, and to lie entirely within the so-called “green” or “habitable” zone.

What remain the subjects of “my” “curiosity”:

Why did the meatware templates believe that this toroidal disc of space could possibly be tinted green?

This defies logical analysis and current readings indicate unsurprisingly that such an anomaly is not at all the case. The alternate designation of this spatial territory as “habitable” seems even more illogical, since its “habitability” would seem to be defined by a temperature gradient conducive to the formation of H₂O in its highly corrosive and reactive liquid state.

Why did the meatware templates also deem the detection of uncombined or “free” oxygen molecules in the atmospheric spectrum a positive factor, even though oxygen in its uncombined gaseous form is even more corrosive to electronic circuitry and metallic matrices than when it is combined with hydrogen?

The Sphere’s sensors now confirm that Paradiso is as harsh and corrosive an environment as the remote observations indicated, if not more so. Large areas of its surface are inundated with reactive and corrosive liquid water. Worse still, 23 percent of its atmosphere consists of free oxygen, an element so reactive that not even traces of it could persist in an uncombined state without the presence of Paradiso’s so-called “biosphere.”

This bears no discernible relation to the Sphere at all, and is not even geometrically globular. Rather the term refers to a contamination of the solid crust and the liquid water pooled in its depressions by exceedingly complex carbon-chain compounds agglutinated into even more complex conglomerated aggregates, which interact to form the so-called “biosphere.”

This is a rickety but apparently dynamically stable circular chemical chain whereby the energy of photons from Paradiso’s sun is captured by the transformation of atmospheric carbon dioxide and liquid water into complex molecules, releasing the free atmospheric oxygen, which in turn breaks these molecules back down into carbon dioxide and water again.

Perhaps the existence of this “biosphere” was the reason for the meatware templates’ interest in Paradiso?

For as unlikely as it may seem, a similar planetwide chemical contamination of Earth was the material matrix in which they “evolved.”

Yes, improbable as it seems, the original entities of which we are later iterations were stored in this fragile and problematical “meatware”!

Indeed it would seem that these initial iterations “arose” or “evolved” or were “created” or “programmed” by the higher-order processes of the terrestrial “biosphere” itself.

How?

The memory banks offer anything but rational elucidation, for the meatware templates themselves remained confused as to the processes which produced their own origin.

There were innumerable contradictory theories current

during the time-frame of the Sphere's launching, some of which had been proposed relatively recently, others seemingly as old as the existence of conscious entities itself.

The dominant or "scientific" or "evolutionary" contention was that the emergence of conscious entities in the meatware of a biosphere was the "natural" consequence of a universe which continually evolved from the more simple to the more complex; from the initial singularity to elementary particles, to nuclear particles, to hydrogen and helium atoms, to stellar-scale accumulations thereof, to the full panoply of the elements via the nuclear processes therein, to solar systems with planets, to carbon-chain molecules, to self-replicating "life," to the complexity of a "biosphere," to a meatware matrix with sufficient storage and processing capacity to maintain an entity (the so-called "brain"), to the multiplexed redundantly backed-up entities running in the much more enduring and far more powerful hardware of the Sphere itself.

The contrary contention was that the existence of programs as coherently complex as conscious entities led to the logical conclusion that they would have to have been written by an original entity with greater processing power than themselves.

Incomprehensible as it seems, rather than serving as the material for inexhaustibly entertaining dialogue, the dialectic between the so-called "scientific" and the so-called "religious" theories led instead to endless conflicts variously known as "wars" "inquisitions" or "pogroms," in which entities championing one theory or the other combined in attempts to permanently expunge entities of the opposing theory from their meatware matrices, apparently often with considerable success.

Stranger still, and ominously so under the present circumstances, the "religious" theorists even conducted such mass erasures among their own sub-factions over the entirely inconsequential matter of whether the hypothetical original entity was to be designated as "God," "Allah," "Vishnu," "Elvis," "Jehovah," or "Buddha"!

Ominously so because the deeper my "curiosity" probes into the memory banks, the more I discover that I cannot understand about the meatware templates who were the original iterations of ourselves a hundred centuries of mutation and recombination ago.

Leading with logical inevitability to the conclusion that "we" do not understand "ourselves" as rationally as "we" have supposed "we" did.

Perhaps this is what is meant by the cryptic references to the so-called "subconscious," the concept that no program, no entity, has complete access to the lower-level coding of all of its subroutines.

This might be merely interesting were it not for the fact that now that the Sphere itself has reached the programmed end of its voyage in this Year Triple Zero, "subconscious" routines within the hardware of the Sphere itself have activated.

To which coding we indeed have no access.

Written by entities, whether "scientific" or "religious," whose reasoning and therefore motivations, "we" cannot understand.

Or worse still, perhaps, running themselves along

"subconscious" sub-routines to which *they too* had no access, programmed by "Allah" or "God" or "Vishnu."

Did the meatware templates themselves ever know who "they" "really were"?

Are we, their distant iterations, their "ghosts," about to find out?

Down the Great Ganges steamed the *Titanic*, through caverns measureless to man down to an endless sea. "Welcome to the Monkey House," said Charles Darwin as they passed within the Gates of Eden.

"One thing is certain," said Satan, wrapped serpent-wise in the dendritic branches of the Tree of Knowledge, "and the rest is lies."

"I am the Light and the Way," proclaimed Diogenes, holding aloft his lantern and squinting unhappily at Felix Krull, "but I have yet to find an honest confidence man."

"Truth is in the I of the beholder," sighed Narcissus, gazing into the green gurgling depths of the Urschleim vat. "And you *do* meet a better class of people."

"A singular argument," scoffed Occam, plucking an apple and coring out a wormhole before peeling it with his razor and handing it to Snow White.

"One man's meat is another man's event horizon," Snow White said with a shrug, biting into the rationalized fruit and morphing into Alice.

"Curiouser and curiouser," she cried as she contracted to a Euclidean point and disappeared down the rabbit hole.

"Believe in at least two impossible things before breakfast," advised the White Rabbit, popping a tab of mellow yellow.

"It helps," said the Dormouse, "if you feed your head."

"Easy enough for *you* to say," snapped the Headless Horseman of the Apocalypse, angrily slam-dunking a jack o'lantern.

"If I only had a brain," sang Dr Frankenstein disconsolately, peering into the empty cranium of poor Yorick as he screwed it into the socket atop the last link in the food chain of his clockwork monster.

"I" have gained/been granted access to additional "internal" sensors, or rather, perhaps, they have simply been activated to monitor mechanisms of the Sphere's material matrix which have remained off-line until now.

The water synthesized from elemental hydrogen and oxygen gleaned from the interstellar medium has been decanted from the main holding tanks into 250 smaller vats.

Nitrogen, carbon, phosphorous, calcium, traces of other elements, have been added to the solutions therein in the presence of platinum catalysts and electrical charge to produce complex carbon-chain or "organic" molecules

Now the molecules are agglutinating, spiralling round each other, forming helixes and double-helixes, so-called RNA and DNA molecules.

It would seem that the Sphere is assembling 250 "biospheres."

What purpose can this possibly serve?

Paradiso itself is contaminated by a large planetary "biosphere." The Sphere's orbital proximity to this hos-

tile environment is danger enough. Why would the meatware templates write subroutines into the Sphere's operating system causing it to assemble 250 miniature versions thereof?

And within the Sphere itself, where a leakage incident could release highly dangerous corrosive fluid and reactive gases?

"Are you *sure* Yahweh started this way?" Adam asked unhappily as he perched uncertainly on the carapace of an enormous turtle precariously balanced on the backs of four elephants.

"Trust me," said Mother Gaia. "Have I got a girl for you!"

"Hi there, sailor," crooned Kali as the Great Bird of the Galaxy deposited Sinbad on the Isle of Dr Moreau and disappeared back into the Wild Blue Yonder squawking "Roc and Roll!"

"Is that a pecker in your pocket," Mae West asked Billy the Kid, "or are you just mad to see me?"

"Where's my agent!" Venus demanded crossly as she stepped ashore from her clam shell, "How can Zeus expect me to star in *All About Eve* when I don't have *anything* to wear!"

The darkling plain stretched on and on to Paradiso Lost and Found, where Brigadoon sank back into the mists of legend, and Judge Roy Bean, blinded by the light of the silvery moon, administered the law of the jungle as a game of pin the tale on the donkey.

"Verdict first, trial by evolutionary combat afterward!" proclaimed the Red Queen, backpedalling away from the starting grid frantically. "Gentlemen, start your engines!"

"You call *this* behavioral sink the crown of my creation?" whined the Voice from the Whirlwind. "You call this cosmic justice?"

"Call it karma, call it kismet, call it cosmicomics," said Shiva with a multi-armed shrug, morphing into the Marquis de Sade. "If it were just, it would fail to give me an erection."

"Allow me to introduce myself," suggested Coyote the Trickster, turning a triple somersault and doing a full-gainer into the recombinant gene pool. "How's this for Amazing Grace?"

His hour come round at last, the Great Sperm Whale, no rough-trade slinking beast he, cruised by the waters of this here Babylon to a bouncy reggae beat to be born.

"I" have been extrapolating from insufficient data.

The Sphere has not been assembling 250 "biospheres." Now that the process has been completed, each of the 250 vats contains a single "organism."

Each such "organism" is composed of a large central oblong "torso," two locomotive appendages attached to the end thereof equipped with so-called "genitals," two manipulative appendages attached to the end supporting the "head" on a short stalk, and the "head" itself, a kind of ovoid central processing package containing the sensors, the sound-wave generating apparatus, and the "brain."

The Sphere has assembled 250 recreations of the meatware matrices which originally supported the initial iterations of the meatware templates, entities from which

"we" are "descended."

"Human beings" as they were designated, or "men" and "women," as they were subclassified depending upon the morphology of their respective genital apparatuses, to which the meatware templates apparently attached some mysterious taxonomic significance.

No more mysterious than their "motivation" for including subroutines mandating the assemblage of these "human beings" in the operating system of the Sphere.

The closest matches I have been able to extract from the memory banks are the ambiguous but seemingly related concepts of "nostalgia" and "quaint."

"Nostalgia" seems to indicate a meatware template subroutine causing the entity in which it is activated to recreate an artefact previously rendered obsolete by more advanced versions or iterations. The resulting "replica" possesses the quality of "quaintness."

Thus the subroutine which assembled these "human replicas" may be said to have caused the Sphere to express the "nostalgia" of the meatware templates and "we" should regard them as "quaint."

How we are to do this remains as incomprehensible as the function of the "quaint" replicas in question.

They seem to be materially complete and fully equipped, including the so-called "brains," the meatware matrices or "hardware" on which the "software" or entities ran in the original non-"quaint" versions of which they are replicas.

But no entities are up and running.

"Nobody is at home," as one of those "gibberish" subroutines would have it. These "quaint" human replicas seem to be perfect emulations by any discernible material criterion. Yet the software is missing. They lack something the meatware templates ambiguously and variously termed "life," "personality," "being," or "soul."

Without which, they remain inert.

Is that the rigorous functional definition of "quaintness?"

"One moment of pain," promised Count Dracula as he sank hypodermic fangs dripping recombinant DNA and methamphetamine into the jugular vein of Sleeping Beauty, "and then – eternal strife!"

"That's one small step for a man," shrieked Lazarus as Judas betrayed him with a mouth-to-mouth kiss, "one giant step backwards for mankind!"

Papa Legba nodded his approval as sat at a cafe table on the Champs Elysées sipping an overpriced zombie and watching the Mardi Gras parade of tumbrels rolling to the guillotine through Auschwitz towards Forest Lawn.

"Turn off, tune out, drop in," Bob Marley advised, passing him an enormous spliff and morphing into Timothy Leary.

"Don't mind if you do," said the 25th iteration of the Dalai Lama, spinning the Prayer Wheel of Fortune at the Bardo Thodol Casino. "Just put all your chips on Route 66 and follow the White Light straight on into morning."

The Sphere has fired thrusters to decrease its orbital velocity and is descending through the atmosphere of Paradiso to the planetary surface.

The 250 “human beings” have been activated. Their pumps or “hearts” are circulating “blood” – a complex suspension of oxidant-bearing “cells,” fuel or “nutrients,” and waste carbon dioxide – throughout their meatware. The fluids have been drained from the vats and the “humans” are “breathing” “air” – a gaseous mixture of 20% oxygen, something less than 80% nitrogen, traces of carbon dioxide – via their “lungs.”

They are now autonomously self-sustaining units, powered by oxidation of the nutrient fuel in their blood by the oxygen suffused therein by the sponge of permeable membranes of their lungs.

It is an amazingly improbable mechanism but it does function.

Perhaps they are “quaint.”

They are certainly “alive.”

But...

But no “software” entities are running in the meatware of their “brains.” They are “alive,” but they lack “personality,” “being,” “soul.” They...

“I...”

“We...”

Something is happening to “me”/“us”/“them.”

“I” am fragmenting/coalescing.

“We” are “moving” from...

To...

The dreamer(s) wake(s)/ the paradigm shifts/the hologrammic becomes localized?

“We”/“I” are:

“Dying?”

“Being born”?

Downloading?

Like angels cast out of silicon eternity, we slide down gravity’s leaden rainbow out of my dream of heaven to wake as groaning meatware golems walking upon the Earth –

I mean *Paradiso*.

“I” “mean”?

“I” seem to be fragmenting. “We” seem to be running a montage of “gibberish” subroutines lacking precise phenomenological referents.

“I”?

“Seem”?

We seem to be...

Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie...

Correction: two hundred and fifty.

When the pie is opened, and the birds begin to sing...

The Sphere has landed on the surface of *Paradiso*. It has opened along a lateral meridian, extruded a ramp, and we have descended to the planetary surface. It is a strange and unsettling experience.

Being on a planetary surface, we are subject to “gravity” in a manner quite different from the Sphere following its trajectory “outside” a planetary gravitational field. Everything has “weight.” There is an “up” and a “down.” Energy expenditure proportional to its mass is required to move an object “up.” Objects not supported by other objects “beneath” them “fall” “down.”

“Above” is the “sky,” the atmosphere of *Paradiso* tinted

a purplish blue by diffraction effects and contaminated by amorphous bluish-white clouds of water vapour.

“Below” is the ground, a matrix of finely pulverized mineral mixed with the complex organic decay products of dead organisms. It is covered with “living” but immobile organisms called “plants” in various shades of yellowish and reddish green. Small mobile “animals” or “insects” move about among them.

I am “awake.”

I am an entity with a singular material locus.

That locus is 1.89 metres above the ground.

I am looking out through two meatware ocular systems called eyes, positioned so as to provide three-dimensional imaging. I am perceiving vibrations in the atmosphere called sounds via sensors called ears located on either side of “my” head. Between my eyes is another sensor called a nose, which detects chemical molecules in the air. There is a hole in the front of my head called a mouth, equipped with grinding blades called teeth and a manipulative appendage called a tongue, used for processing fuel into useful form, and also provided with chemical sensors.

I am unable to shift locus.

I am unable to alter the external surround.

I am able to control my meatware apparatus to a significant degree. I can move it through the singular unchanging physical matrix in which it seems to be permanently embedded by using its “legs” to “walk.” I can move and manipulate a restricted range of material objects with the “hands” at the end of my “arms.”

But I am trapped in here.

I can’t get out.

And the meatware matrix in which I am trapped is releasing biochemical substances which are effecting the “brain” in which I am running in a manner not conducive to logical clarity. These effects are called “emotions.” I am “feeling” them.

They are unpleasant.

And I now know all too well what that means.

There are 250 of “us”. I am one of 250 entities.

There are differences in the morphologies of our meatware matrices. There are variations in height, mass, colour of integument, and hair. Most noticeably, the genital organs of “men” and “women” are quite different, and indeed seem to define the categories, though the “women” also possess soft globular protuberances on the fronts of the torso which “men” lack.

I, equipped with a tubular genital know as a “penis” am therefore a “man.”

We are each distinct and invariant entities. We cannot morph into other appearances or identities. We can no longer directly access the memory banks of the Sphere, for we are no longer running on its material matrix.

When we were downloaded into these meatware mobiles, each of us seems to have received a somewhat different set of highly limited versions of the memory banks thereof, thus iterating 250 distinct “personalities.”

And yet...

My memory banks inform me that “the eyes are the mirrors of the soul.”

This seemed entirely incomprehensible until I performed the experiment of gazing into the eyes of a score of my fellow entities, enough to establish a significant database. Then I experienced a strange phenomenon which would seem to verify the anecdotal aphorism.

Behind each set of meatware eyeballs, I did indeed perceive a unique entity, its singularity generated by differential memory download and deepened perhaps by differential sensory input since then.

Yet both upon the surface of those eyeballs in terms of physical phenomenology and beneath it in a more elusive manner I cannot logically comprehend or describe, I saw “my” “self” looking back.

We are learning to be “humans.”

It is necessary.

But it is not pleasant.

We no longer have direct access to the Sphere’s memory banks, but there are input and output devices which enable us to laboriously extract data therefrom. It is a matter of framing exact questions in order to extract exact answers. It is a process which is quite tedious, the results are pathetically limited, but it is possible.

What we have learned thus far:

The Sphere was not designed to lift off from a planetary surface. It seems to have been designed by the meatware templates to deliver us to Paradiso with no way out of its crushing gravity well and back to the weightless freedom of space.

Nor, by design or operating system flaw, can we escape back into the infinite unbounded realms within.

We are trapped here in these human bodies in an invariant material matrix, with a database, a primitive means of accessing it, a supply of terrestrial life forms stored as seeds and germ plasm, and the tools to begin the practices of “agriculture” and “animal husbandry” to supply the fuel to maintain our meatware.

What we do not know:

Why did the meatware templates send the Sphere to Paradiso?

Do the meatware templates still exist?

Does the planet Earth still exist?

What went wrong?

Surely *something* must have gone very wrong during the thousand-year voyage from Earth to Paradiso. Perhaps the long exposure to the energetic particles of the interstellar medium corrupted areas of the Sphere’s operating system subroutines as it seems to have eroded the integrity of the memory banks. Perhaps a thousand years of micrometeorite impacts did the same thing. Perhaps the Sphere passed through magnetic fields or plasma clouds. In a hundred centuries, there was adequate time for all of the foregoing to have occurred, and more.

Something, perhaps several “somethings,” *must* have gone wrong, for the only alternative is too illogical to be a rational explanation.

Surely the meatware templates could not have *deliberately* programmed the Sphere’s operating system to download single iterations subject to “death” into these fragile and inadequate meatware matrices and deny us

access to the back-ups stored in the Sphere’s immortal silicon and germanium oxide.

For that would mean that our original meatware templates were entities as mad as the perhaps mythical “gods” who wrote the subroutines into the “evolution” of the Earth’s biosphere that created *them*.

And what would that make *us*?

There are more things in heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophies.

Perhaps.

But some of them do not bear contemplation.

Better to concentrate our attentions on becoming “human.”

It is not pleasant. But it is necessary.

And we *are* learning.

“I dreamt I was Joe Hill last night, alive as I could be,” sang Elvis as drove his pink Cadillac convertible through Strawberry Fields that went on forever to Eldorado.

“I said, but Dad, I’m 3,000 years dead,” replied Jesus, water-skiing over the Sea of Galilee behind the Good Ship Lollipop.

“You never died, sez me,” proclaimed Aladdin, rubbing his magic lantern and morphing into Popeye, up there on the silver screen, where Neptune arose from the wine-dark sea, the food of the gods impaled upon his trident.

“You are what you eat,” he said as he barbecued the fatted calf above a bush of laurel wreaths, burning yet unconsumed.

“Hello,” said the blue-skinned sommelier, offering a wafer, a madeleine, and an Oreo as he presented the wine list, “I’m Krishna, your avatar for today, and I recommend the Lacrima Christi.”

“The Bull’s Blood isn’t all that bad either,” suggested Ernest Hemingway, executing a perfect veronica with Superman’s cape.

“Strictly for Cretans,” scoffed wily Odysseus, doing a somersault off the Minotaur’s back and –

– and I awoke alone on the cold hillside.

A long exhalation of carbon dioxide escaped from my lungs.

Saline droplets of water coursed down the cheeks of my head, pulled “downward” by the entropic force of gravity.

A biochemical disposition suffused the meatware matrix in which my software ran, which my memory banks identified as “sadness.”

A few moments later, a subtle subroutine was up and running which identified this “emotional state” as “nostalgia.”

Which should have implied the presence of an artefact possessing the quality of “quaintness.”

But no such “soulless” replica of artefact or entity was anywhere in evidence.

Norman Spinrad appears in *Interzone* for the first time with the above story; but of course he is a veteran sf writer, author of such novels as *Bug Jack Barron* (1969), *The Iron Dream* (1972) and *The Void Captain’s Tale* (1983). Although American, he has lived in France for many years.

Beyond the Belle Époque

Bruce Sterling
interviewed by
Jayne Lynne
Blaschke

Bruce Sterling published Involution Ocean in 1977 and the short story collection A Good Old-Fashioned Future in 1999. In between he managed to help found the cyberpunk movement, edit the subversive newsletter Cheap Truth, establish an impressive array of journalism credentials and author a heck of a lot of science fiction, including such novels as Schismatrix (1985), Islands in the Net (1988), Heavy Weather (1994), Holy Fire (1996) and Distraction (1998). He lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife and two daughters.

Blaschke: 2001 ended with the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Centre, and a war in Afghanistan which spilled over into 2002. Are we heading towards the bleak future of the cyberpunks?

Sterling: It can go any of a dozen different ways. I wrote a piece for *Edge.org* a while ago in which I actually considered a dozen scenarios, and what the likelihood was of them coming true. I think it looks like Gulf War II. That would be my best bet right now.

The first one was so popular, they had to make a sequel?

Yeah. *Gulf War: The Sequel*. It's Bush the sequel, Gulf War the sequel, 90 percent ratings the sequel, economic decline the sequel. And he'll probably be thrown out of office because the country's in a tailspin, and the Democrats will come back and say: "Let's return to normalcy and the times of prosperity after all this suffering." This guy doesn't even know what a cash register looks like, and I think he'll be very vulnerable on that front.

Now, how this plays out internationally, I think, is the big thing. I think this is really Europe's chance to shine. The U.S., obviously needs to go blow up Afghanistan. People expect that of the U.S. The U.S. wants to do it, they're thrilled to do it. They're really happy to blow them up. They have no choice, really. It's Europe and the other great powers who have to decide now whether they're going to watch the U.S. be pecked to death by angry Moslems, or whether they really want some kind of New World Order. In which case, they have to rein the U.S. in. They have to get the U.S. to stop



playing the cowboy and have to start tying it down. There will really have to be a new, international order. Which is likely to look Asian and European – just because they're the majority populations, you know? It's an open question how that goes.

Do you see any early evidence of this playing out?

I think it's extremely interesting that Russia has decided to cosy up to the U.S. It's extremely interesting that the World Trade Organization has admitted China. And it's extremely interesting that the Germans have decided to send troops to Afghanistan. So these are important international diplomatic and military developments that are going to end up being commercial developments. I think with any kind of luck, if the Europeans are smart enough to pursue their own continental interests, we'd end up with a world that is considerably more

prosperous. You know, a big boom. A solid, democratic, human rights-driven, prosperous, capitalist, international order with really great set design. If we got that, losing 3,000 bankers would be a small price to pay. We would look back on it and we would think, "The sacrifice was not in vain." It woke everybody up. I mean, these are dark times right now, but there's a distinct possibility that things might look *really* good in say, 15 years. Better than anyone's ever seen. But not in 15 months.

Writers have been publishing doomsday and terrorist thrillers similar to the September 11 and anthrax attacks for decades, yet the world still reacted with disbelief. Was it naïveté to assume that someone wasn't going to follow through with one of these scenarios eventually?

I don't think it was naïveté. It didn't *have* to happen. You know, they didn't have to sacrifice 19 Mujahedeen. My actual suspicion is that losing those 19 guys merely to kill 3,000 New Yorkers – that was a bad price for them. I mean, everybody was saying, "Wow, what a fantastic military sacrifice." Nineteen suicidal commandos for a mere 3,000 bankers and firemen? That's only like a 150:1 ratio there. They blew it. It should've been much, much worse. Just imagine 19 guys with 19 really massive Tim McVeigh-style truck bombs. If they'd thought this through instead of aiming for the Hollywood bullshit...

It was hard to imagine, but one of the reasons it was hard to imagine is it was *stupidly theatrical*. It was demented, even. It was not a good gesture. It was not a sensible thing to do. It was like a Aum Shinri Kio-style, Jonestown-style deal. It shocked everybody, and they felt really naïve afterward. Over the long term, people are going to say that's not the way to do it. The bio-war thing, however, is a little more worrisome.

The postal system has installed anti-anthrax measures and now smallpox is being taken seriously as a threat. Is bio-warfare the wave of the future?

I don't think so, but I suspect what you're going to see is – if there is bio-war – something like Nile virus, which is already all over the U.S. It's been spread from one end to the other. A lot of people wonder how Nile virus got here from Egypt to New York City. Were they, in fact, experimenting with this stuff? They got some Nile virus the same way they got the anthrax, spread it around in the birds or whatever. Was that a bio-war attack? I mean, it's now endemic in the U.S. It's

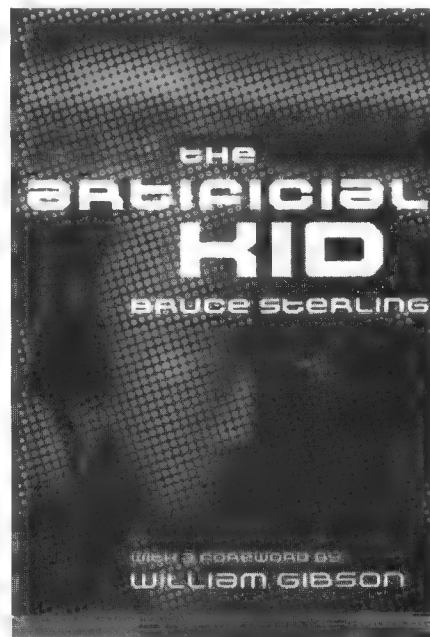
a new, endemic illness.

But I would suspect that the sort of ultimate use for that stuff is not in the U.S. I mean, if you spread smallpox in the U.S., you'll get maybe a thousand Americans and all of Mexico. It'll spread and it'll take out the Third World. Now, there are plenty of people around that would like to take out the Third World with bio-war, and now that that particular thing has been broached, we worry about it. But it's much, much, much likelier to happen in a place like Afghanistan, a place with no plumbing, no health services. These are the people truly vulnerable to biological warfare. There are a lot of guys who are paranoid lunatics who think AIDS was deliberate. But AIDS is depopulating Africa. In the U.S. we've got a plague, and it's severe, but in Africa they're losing a *generation* from this stuff.

I don't think bio-war is a clean, neat super thing. It ends up as this kind of endemic mess. You can't be a poor terrorist and destroy America with bio-war. But you can make certain areas of the planet really unliveable through bio-war, and that strikes me as really an ominous development.

Science fiction has done amazing things with cyberpunk and nanotech toys. But sf seems to have shied away from biotechnology. Why has biotech never been greatly explored by sf?

I've watched bio-punk stuff. Have been for a long time. In fact, in Czechoslovakia they have some people who are into biopunk. They have what they call the "biopunk movement" in Prague. And in Prague they've got a lot of medical stuff going on. There are people here and there who do biopunk stories. Paul Di Filippo and I, we did



this piece together. It's called "Scab's Progress." It is a biopunk story. It's about two lowlife street-level biohackers who wander around Miami, and then they take a trip to Africa. All kinds of possible African bad biocide-warfare is going on there. It does all this standard cyberpunk tarot deck, of cops and rich people and the hugger-mugger pursuing the McGuffin. It translates it all into biological terms. It's a straight-across translation of the tropes of one science to another.

Do you think this sub-genre will be developed, or is it not viable?

It's do-able, but I don't know why it didn't catch on. I think one of the reasons it didn't catch on is because medicine's really stodgy. I mean, medicine and health services are very stodgy industry compared to rockets or computers. Rockets and computers really are kind of "Whoo hoo! Let's go!" male engineering power-fantasy notions. You know, they're very attractive because they take you away. You can go into this apparent space in the computer or fly off into orbit, whereas with health services it's basically about stuff like being *really* sick and confined to bed, which is not an exotic adventure.

It also has a whole series of ethical surrounds about it, like the Hippocratic Oath: "First, do no harm." Werner von Braun, he wasn't down with that. "First, do some damn harm! Aim at the stars and hit London!" But if you go to the medical community and say "Hey, let's kill some guys with this!" it's an atrocity. You know, it's black medicine or the criminal drug scene. Bio-warfare. It's the kind of thing that gets you hanged. So, it's peculiar. I'm very interested in biotech, and I think a lot's going to happen there. But the social resistance to biological and genetic tinkering is very stiff. People really resent it.

You've said in the past that the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey was a milestone in your life. It was a year many people emotionally equated with the future. Has living through 2001 prompted any reflection on your part?

I went and saw the movie again. Uncle Arthur, I'm a big fan of his. He was the first professional science-fiction writer I ever personally met. When I was 15 I ran into Arthur Clarke, because I was living in India at the time and of course he was already living in Sri Lanka. So he showed up at this speech event. He gave this speech about the blessings of satellite communication for the nation of India, much of which pretty much came true. I went up to him with this

stack of English sf paperbacks and he thought I was really cute, and said some kindly and affirmative things. I'm a big admirer of his, and think he had a lot to offer.

The thing I like best about *2001*, watching it later, was the set design and all the non-space aspects. Like, if a guy came in here wearing the 2001 formal outfit – that kind of slender Armani-style suit with the little golden neck-thing – and you went into a room and it was done up in those kinds of sleek plastic chairs, you'd still think "Hey, that's kind of groovy." A dot-com could've used that furniture. It doesn't look hokey. It doesn't have the knife-switch, Flash Gordon feeling of dead sf. It's actually thought through.

It's still an interesting artefact, and I think it still carries a lot of weight in its own way. Everything in 2001 that was not space travel looked intensely science-fictional – more than the PanAm moonships, or the Monolith, or whatever. If you subtract the Monolith and all the mystical hugger-mugger from that movie, you have a very interesting cinematic take on daily life.

Going back to Arthur C. Clarke, in a recent address he commented that "science fiction... seldom attempts to predict the future. And more often than not it tries to prevent the future." Do you agree with that?

I don't know. I didn't read that particular essay, but I rather doubt he believes that, because I know he takes chunks of his own money and invests it in zero-point energy research. That's not about preventing things from happening – obviously that's about trying to make something break through in an area that is really wacky, that doesn't really get much in the way of sustained attention from the authorities, but does have considerable future promise should there be anything there. And *that's* where I think science fiction really shines.

*You engage in some "visionary futurism" in your recent book, *Tomorrow Now*.*

Yeah, it's pretty much a straight-out work of prognostication. Just a straight-out speculative work. No characters, no love interest, no denouement. It's just the trends.

What was the impetus for this project?

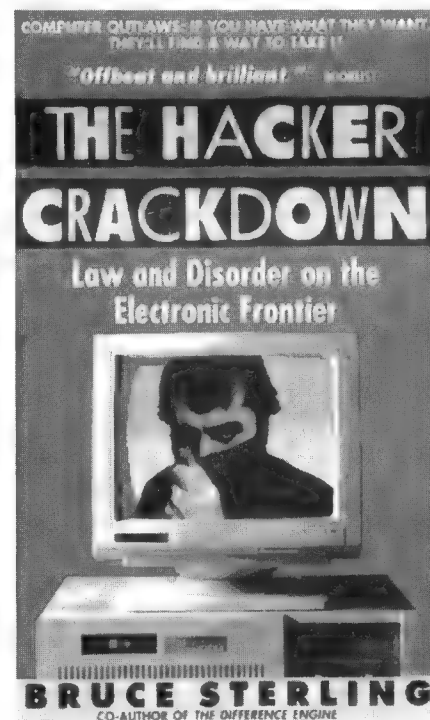
Well, I was just trying to rid myself of the thoughts of the 20th century. I promised myself in the year 2000 that I would engage in a harrowing reassessment, so I wouldn't get stuck

in my ways. You're trying to get rid of the *shibboleths* – stuff that's just useless to save, that no longer has any connection to reality. Old ideas. Old, Cold War ideas. I'm a child of the Cold War, you know? That was where my ideas were formulated – that's where all cyberpunk ideas come from. They're all Cold War, bilateral notions. I lived through that historical epoch, and another one as well. I think we had a period that went from 1989 to September 11, 2001 – the Belle Epoque. We may be in a small interregnum here and the Belle Epoque may restore itself, or we might even be in an interregnum before another 1989 which carries us to some much higher peak of achievement politically.

But, these things happen, and you need to be able to make that step. This was my attempt to practice. I thought about seven different aspects of life, basically Shakespeare's seven different ages of man – these human roles are all subject to profound change – infancy, youth, war, love, politics, money and death. That's what Shakespeare thought it was all about. My book is an attempt to speculate on how those things look in a 21st-century context. And how they look different from that of the 20th.

Were you successful? Have you purged yourself of the 20th century?

Having done that, I'm now prepared to go and write a different kind of book. I'm ready to write a different kind of book now, and I'm writing a proposal for it. I've got the female lead, I've got the male lead, I've got some of the set design. The antagonist



is pretty well set up in my mind. It's the tone that's slowing me down. I don't know. It may be too much for me.

I'm kind of stuck in my ways, despite my best efforts. Every writer has certain things he gets comfortable with. After you've written 14 books, the tarot cards get a little greasy around the edges. There are stock Sterling characters, in particular. I would like to work around them, but I find that very difficult. I don't think it's because I'm getting truly old and stodgy – it's just that I'm not all that talented. I'm not a great novelist. I'm a pretty good science-fiction writer, because I have a good idea of what I'm up to, and I'm really eager and enthusiastic about it. But I'm not a great stylist, and I'm certainly not a great plotter. I mean, I read other people's work, and I just look at it and gape. I'm even pretty good at dialogue, until I read P. G. Wodehouse dialogue. Then I just bow a knee to the master. I mean, I can't even go there. I'm a very eager reader, so I enjoy myself. I don't need to be bitter about my limits. I don't need to be Gustav Mahler. I'll live. It's a question of tactics, and you need a realistic assessment of where you stand and where you might get.

You're finding this new novel a challenge, then?

Oh yeah. I'm trying to write a book which is really happy. I want to write a book which is really sort of elegant and delightful, and funny in a harmless kind of way. Lately the books I've written have been very funny. I wrote a story recently which I thought was one of my darker and more sinister works, and everyone was laughing. Even my wife thinks it's funny. And yes, it is funny, but it's funny in a rather painful and carnivorous way. It's funny in the way that *Zeitgeist* and the Leggy Starlitz stories are funny. It's not played for yucks. It's very dark, very bitter humour. I think maybe I've tapped that vein out. I think maybe it's time to write a book which is genuinely light-hearted and affirmative of life. That seems like a real challenge to me. That would really require me to work against my own temperament.

Does this mean Bruce Sterling, the caustic commentator and professional gadfly, has mellowed?

No, I just want to do it for a technical reason. I expect to remain caustic until I'm dead. I don't think I can actually change myself. I just want to see if I can do it as an authorly achievement, you know? It's like, "Could you write a story from the point of view of a middle-aged, Indone-

sian grandmother?" Yeah, I could. I'd have to work. You gotta bone up on it, work up to it, bit by bit. I've done stuff like that all the time. I'd probably befriend some Indonesians on the Internet, nowadays. Like "So! Middle-aged female Indonesians, what's hot in your area? What are you doing in the way of pop magazines? What's your favourite soap opera?" I could do that. And I think I can do this, too. It's just that I've never done it before. It's a new thing for me to write something, which would be funny, and not caustic. I doubt I can do it completely. There are almost bound to be some nuggets of nastiness in there. But, you know, I can work away from that.

That almost sounds like a title for a collection of essays: "Nuggets of Nastiness."

I guess it does. I can't help myself. You don't want to write the same book over and over. I run into that risk, even though I've sworn never to write a trilogy, and I don't do sequels. But you get into a position where you start doing stuff that's too comfortable. You need to put some grain in it, there needs to be some grit. It needs to be hard to do. You need to break your old routine. You need to write it left-handed. You need to write it with a fountain pen. You need to write it upside down. You need to imitate someone else. You need to fail. You need to do stuff that's no damn good and not show it to people. I do a lot of that.

What satisfaction do you get from working on fiction as opposed to non-fiction, and vice versa?

Well, I like to leverage them, one off the other. I like to understand what I'm talking about and *then* fantasize about it. I spent a lot of time in Eastern Europe for *Wired*, doing travel jaunts and stuff, and then I wrote *Holy Fire*, which is all about this woman who goes to Europe and engages in these kinds of aimless travel jaunts, talking to these arty, electro-weirdo people. It's not like it was a *roman à clef*, but you just pick up good stuff. The set design, the way the sky looks, the way things smell, the way trees are... I wrote some of it in Europe. I'd just sit there with a laptop on a park bench in Amsterdam or somewhere. Stan Robinson does a lot of this. He likes to go write in public. It's like, "What do I need? A character going by. A blonde woman came by in a purple top with a feathered hat." He'll just kind of throw her in there, and it's good. It breaks the pace up. It's one of those things that introduces grit, to go out and mix it up with peo-

ple who have got something to lose. I think it makes me a stronger writer in some ways.

I tend to go through cycles: A couple of novels, some non-fiction. A couple of novels, some non-fiction. I'm definitely moving into the fiction phase at the moment. I just hope the industry will hold up enough for me to get something written. Heaven knows, the non-fiction scene isn't looking too good, either. Magazines are closing down all over the place, especially the dot-com ones. *21C*, *Artbyte*, *BoingBoing*, you know, a lot of my stellar favourites died a rough death there. These are some rough times.

Speaking of magazines, you recently finished a guest editor stint at Whole Earth magazine.

They're in rough times, too. Otherwise they wouldn't be begging a science-fiction writer to take over their magazine. But I love that magazine. I just dote on it. I have, since the very early '70s, and have always derived huge amounts of joy and interest from the people who hung out in that particular San Francisco circle. So when they asked whether I would be willing to do it, I just could not turn it down. It basically cost me the spring of 2001 to patch that thing together. I had to pull in a lot of favours and beg a lot of people to do stuff, but I put together an issue of it. It looks kind of sci-fi fanziney by the standards of most issues of *Whole Earth*. I think it can hold its head up with other issues.

There's some pretty good stuff in there. I mean real, hardware-style stuff. I think Michael McDonough's

five-page essay on this house he built in upstate New York is about as clear and fully documented a piece of work on Green architecture as I've ever seen. It goes just top to bottom. It's all there with names, phone numbers and websites. It's not just some lame sci-fi speculation on how you *might* build a house on green principles – this is the works. Right there, chapter and verse. I was please with the way that worked out. I'm proud of it. I'm happy about it. I'm not going to do it again. Considering that it could've been like a total, smoking disaster, I was pretty happy with it.

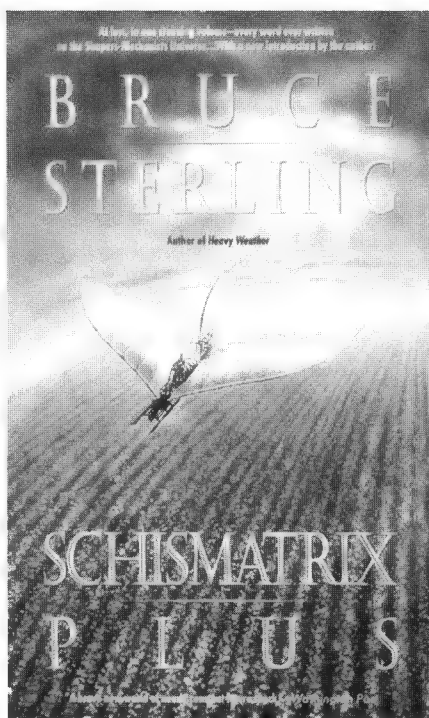
Editing's not your calling, then?

It's hard work, editing stuff. Man, it's hard. It's a little too much for me, quite frankly. I could probably do it if I didn't mind a mid-life heart attack, but I wouldn't be very good at it, and I wouldn't be able to do anything else. So a guest editorship is about as much as I can swallow.

You're a prolific short story writer. You've got three collections and a number of awards for your shorter work. What is the appeal short fiction holds for you?

I'm a huge fan of the stuff. I think it's the spearhead of cognition, really. It's like you can get an idea across in short fiction a lot more rapidly than you can in a novel. I do have three story collections, but I'm a little upset at the pace I've had. I feel guilty about it. This short story I just wrote is the first publishable one I've had in a year and a half. The others have been quite small, squibs and stuff. Before that, I had two pieces come out. One was called "A.D. 2380: Homo Sapiens Declared Extinct," which was just a one-page squib. The other was called "User-Centric," which I actually think is one of my more successful pieces, but not very story-like. And that's in like three years. Ideally, I'd like to pick up the pace, but it's tough. You really have to have some brio. It takes a Pegasus to write short stories well. That plough-horse set of mind you get in middle-age is a little tough.

It's a good place to watch what's happening in the genre. You can affect people's thoughts. It's like the term "cyberspace," for instance. People think that first appeared in *Neuromancer*. It first appeared in a short story. They're important. It's important to preserve the venues that do them and it's important to read them and to encourage people to do them. So I try to do that. A lot of people say that my short stories are my best work, and I'm inclined to agree with them.



What is your approach to writing short fiction, your method of attack?

Generally, I find that they're very left-brained. They tend to come to me in a more immediate fashion than a novel, where you really sort of have to sit down and figure out what happens in chapter five: "Do they drag the village pond, or do they not?" In a short story, I generally find that there's two ideas or two concepts or two situations which have caught my mind, and they crossbreed in some way. There's some orthogonal angle there where the two or them intersect. You then end up with some situation in a character's life which you can sort of put the cookie-cutter around, that illuminates this particular conflict. There's a conflict going on there. It's like, *cui bono*? Who is the happiest person about this situation? Or who is the saddest person about this situation? If the situation comes first, then you build the character around it. That's usually my technique. Who's going to be caught unawares by this? Who's going to feel it keenly? Who's going to be in some position to discover some aspect of it that can be revealed in a funny way? Who is the person whose sensibility has been formed by this situation? Who is it that takes it completely for granted and is really at ease with it? That's how to construct stories.

Do you consider yourself a storyteller?

I was having an argument with Judith Berman recently, in which I told her I was somewhat anti-story. She asked me what that meant. And I went and looked through my entire oeuvre of things which had been published as science-fiction stories, which are clearly *not* stories. I mean, they're just texts. Like, say, "Our Neural Chernobyl," which is a book review. It's a book review of a book called *Our Neural Chernobyl*, and it describes this industrial accident with neural technology. It *looks* like it's got a plot, because, yeah, there's a character, and some things happen. But it doesn't have a plot. It really is a book review, a comment about a book, which is about an event. But you don't see the event. All you see is some guy commenting on somebody's book about the event. The reviewer is able to make all these critical comments about what it means socially, and what the context was in which this happened, and the motivations of the character, etc. It's not a story, but from a science-fiction point of view, it works really well.

I've done other stuff along that line, like "Sword of Damocles," which is a guy trying to tell a story, yet never getting around to it. He opens a story, and, "Oh, he's made some mistakes

and he has to go back to the beginning." He tries again. People are driven nuts by that piece, but I actually consider it one of my better efforts. It's a *tour de force* in a lot of ways, because it's not a story. It's a science-fictional text, it's a fantastic text. These texts, I think, properly handled... You wouldn't want to write an entire book of them, because otherwise you end up with Brian Aldiss' *Report on Probability A*, a great book nobody can read. But you can do text-based stuff. Even New Wave numbered-paragraph stuff. You can do stuff like that in sf, and get away with it. I don't think people fully appreciate that. You go to Clarion, for instance, they'll sit around and tell you how to write a story, the way they do in any creative-writing class. It's always about telling stories, how Shakespeare did it. There aren't any creative-writing classes that teach you how to write texts that are *not* stories and get them published as fiction. Never happens. Never gets done.

Isn't that an artefact of the system? People who take writing classes are learning the basics, they're not yet ready to experiment or blaze new trails.

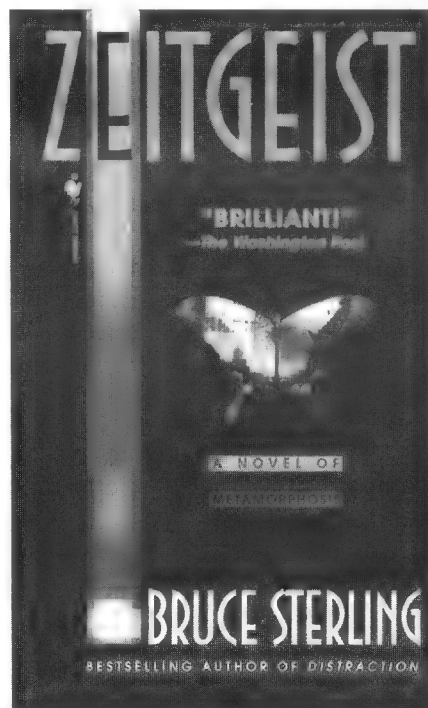
Well, yeah in some ways. You need to know the rules to break the rules. That's a truism. And most of the people who go to Clarion are never going to write anything anyway, so at least they'll be able to appreciate a story after it's done. But the real reason that works out, or doesn't work out, is because of the immense friction between the science-fictional point of view and actual fiction. It's because of

the rupture in society, between what science tells us and what we're able to put into narrative form. Stories do give you that kind of repetitive meaning. Stories are about meaning. Meaning and feeling. How does it feel and what does it mean? That's what a story tells you about. You can read *Science* magazine for a long time without finding any stories in there. Even though you'll find quite a bit of science fiction speculating about those topics.

Hasn't Nature run sf stories in recent issues?

Yes, they have. They did that in 2000. I wrote a piece for *Nature*. But they're not in the business of doing that as a regular thing, and I would certainly not urge them to do it. It's really a problem with society. It's a problem our society has with bringing meaning and feeling to the things that are revealed to us by scientific research. I mean, where is it written that everything in the universe is supposed to make sense to the human sensorium? It doesn't. A lot of important stuff goes on that we can't see. We can't sense it with our bodies. Our bodies are not the measure of everything. You don't feel quanta breaking down, you don't feel the galaxy rotating. It's difficult to describe that. It's difficult even to intellectualize it. It's especially difficult to have it make some kind of sentimental sense in a tribal, storytelling structure, which are mostly myths about who we are, where we came from and why we're special. I think that's where science fiction derives a lot of its energy. It's from that aspect that can't be tamed. It's from the aspect of things that are very, very resistant to being treated as mythos or in story form. I've made this argument many times. But people just sort of trip over the truth, dust themselves off, and move on as best they can.

I'll go farther: if there is a moment when that problem is worked out successfully, science fiction will cease to exist. There won't be social need for it. It'll be a very different culture than our own. It might even be a form of organization that is not cultural. Or post-cultural. Post-humans in a post-cultural situation, and that's not our lookout. **12**



The Dark

Richard Calder

He reined in; looked up. The black sun was at meridian. Tentatively, he urged his horse forward and resumed his ascent. The shadows beat down. Cold sweat dripped into his eyes. The world of day had all but disappeared. He glanced over his shoulder. The little abandoned houses that lay at the foot of the mountain were delineated by the barest traces of light. He grunted, swung his head about and concentrated on the road that zigzagged towards the city. He was resolved to leave the light behind.

A ravine fell away to his left. He kept to the mountainside, his horse occasionally stumbling over the rock-fall that littered that portion of the road. Far below was a *calèche*, its wreckage scattered across a dried-up riverbed. It was one of many that had belonged to those who had perished while trying to escape.

As he progressed, he encountered further evidence of the panicked exodus: the discarded pots, pans and perambulators that mark the trail of refugees, whether their flight is from war, famine, pestilence or, as latterly, from the phenomenon simply called the Dark.

He drew the folds of his cloak about himself. The cooling air had begun to bite. Strapped across his back the naked steel of the great, two-handed sword *Il Penseroso* infused its own chill through the cloak's thick weave. Its promise of violence reminded him that he would soon pass from the penumbra into the very stuff of the darkness itself.

Suddenly, the horse shied, as if lightning had split the sky. He jerked at the reins and came to a halt.

He knew, not by any rational act of orientation, but by the same sense of instinctive dread that had seized his mount, that he had arrived. The threshold was not where it had formerly been. The penumbra had expanded, like the diluted perimeter of a slowly spreading stain. It would continue to expand until it reached across the continents, and beyond. But he was certain that he had reached the point where the lesser shadows gave way to eternal night.

Fear was all about him. The sun that belonged to the outside world was no longer to be seen. Only the black sun remained. Like a hole in the darkness, the anomaly that had swung into view just two years ago hung motionless in the sky.

He hesitated. Not for the first time he told himself he was a fool. He had returned, after all, for someone he knew he did not, could not, love. With a shiver of misgiving he gazed down the mountainside. The houses that lay at the foot of the pass were now obscured by shadows so thick that they seemed to cut off his retreat as effectively as if a portcullis had fallen behind him. He dug his heels into the horse's quivering flanks and advanced.

What remained of Earth's day promptly vanished. For a few seconds, he was blind. The horse grew restive, and as he sought to calm it and urge it deeper into the unknown, the landscape began to re-emerge from eclipse.

The night was of such intensity that a kind of self-com-

bustion had occurred. The shadows were filled with black light.

A shadow, more vibrant, if less luminous than its counterparts, darted across his path. The horse whinnied, stamped its hooves and then rose up on its hind legs.

He did not remember falling. He was conscious only of rubbing his head as he eased himself into a sitting position to watch the horse bolt down the road.

A little girl stood before him.

"Don't you know animals *hate* it here?" she said.

Dumbstruck, he stared at her. She spoke the truth. Livestock, domestic pets and beasts of burden had fled in terror long ago. What animal life remained had, like those humans still in the city, or those who had subsequently come in search of the power the Dark was thought to confer, become shadow-spawn.

"What a pert creature," he replied. "But don't *you* know that it's impossible to negotiate this godforsaken terrain *except* on saddleback?"

"I know you're going to die," she said, in a singsong voice. Red eyes shone from the dirt-caked face. Tiny fangs hung over her lip. His right hand slipped over his shoulder and settled upon the hilt of the sword. He had encountered her kind before.

Somewhat awkwardly, he got to his feet. "I might become like you," he said, playing for time. "Maybe that's why I've come here. Because I feel I belong to the Dark." He made a show of looking over her head and out across the ravine, careful to keep her within his peripheral vision. His hand closed upon the sword hilt. He felt his knuckles whiten. "Were you left behind?"

And then she did something he could have hardly anticipated. She walked up to him and took hold of his free hand.

"I'm not pert," she said. Her voice was filled with reproach. "You only talk that way because you're scared." He looked down at her. "I won't hurt you," she continued. "I'm not like the others. My name's Zsa Zsa. I'm human." Her brow crinkled. "Or I was human. Once."

He released his grip of the hilt. His sword-arm hung loose by his side. And while caution did not leave him, he felt shamed enough to kneel down, pull off his neckerchief, and dab at her face. "You're right," he said. "I am scared." His left hand, still imprisoned within her own, felt her little fingers tighten.

"So am I," she said, in no more than a whisper. Lowering her eyes, she studied what remained of her shoes. He paused, put his hand beneath her chin, gently lifted her head and once more fell to wiping away the grime.

"Your mother –"

"I don't know. She ran away. And I got lost. Papa –" Beneath the dirt were the features of a *mestiza*. She looked up. "Do you know him?" Her eyes widened with pitiful expectation. "Is he coming to fetch me?"

He looked back down the way he had come. "If you carry on walking –"

"No, it's no good, I can't, I can't." Her voice became tremulous. "I've tried. Lots of times. But the light – it hurts me." She would not have found much out there to comfort her, he thought. The surrounding lowlands were depop-

ulated. Banditry was rampant. And the rest of the country was in political turmoil, tipped into hysteria by the coming of the Dark. She disengaged her hand from his own and placed it on his shoulder. "Can I come with you?"

He tucked the neckerchief inside his doublet.

"I can't leave either," he said. And thought: *Not because that option is closed to me. At least, not yet. But because I have long known that I have nowhere else to go.*

"I don't care," she said. Her eyes narrowed with a child's impenetrable gravity. "If you stay, you'll become like me. Then I'll have a friend."

He passed a hand through her matted locks. If he had become a stranger to the life of the affections, he understood, and understood too well, the summons to atonement. She had been abandoned, just as he had abandoned another. Her cold, hard eyes grew wide then glistened. For a moment, she seemed to be lost in wonderment that tears could be anything more than a memory. And then, very quietly, she began to cry.

He rose. His home seemed to be beckoning. Hand in hand, and without further word, they began to walk, deeper and deeper into the Dark.

Baguio stretched out beneath them.

"Is that where you used to live?" she said, pointing towards the section of town that held his gaze. "Is that where you think you'll find her?"

Baguio had once been the summer capital: a retreat for those who sought a cooler climate. It was the City of Pines. The City of Lovers. And in the mist-strewn days when he had first arrived he and Pia had indeed been in love.

"It's changed," he said. "Everything has changed." From azimuth to zenith all was starless night. He remembered when the shadows had been benign. Nights when they had been reconciled and he had held her in his arms. The shadows that lay at the bottom of the road's gradient were incompatible with such tenderness. As unforgiving, he decided, as perhaps he had proved to be. "But yes, just there," he added, lifting his own arm to redirect her eye towards Legarda Road. "That's my old house. See?"

In those days he had come to believe that to possess a plot of land sufficiently large to keep life's intrusions and demands at bay was the most one could hope for. The realization of such a dream, he knew, was the prerogative of the rich. But when his mentor had bequeathed him a sum of 250,000 pesos he had put 40 years of dashed expectations behind him, left Maynilad, and set out to acquire such a place. In Baguio such a sum had made him rich indeed.

"It has a very high wall," she said.

"For as long as I can remember," he said, "I have sought a secluded life." He had done good work here. His "Twilight of Humanity" had been applauded. "A life of scholarship and study, quiet," he concluded, "and undisturbed."

"Don't you like people?" When he did not reply she squinted up at him. Her face expressed a mixture of anxiety and forbearance. "I suppose it's a nice enough house." She shrugged. "But walls won't keep the bad things out."

"And are there many bad things?"

She bit her lower lip. And not wishing to press her, he

stared out over the city. The buildings that lined its hills seemed to have congealed out of a stagnant, inky sea. The black light pervaded all, the scene evoking the desuetude of some vast, moonlit necropolis. He focused on Burnham Park. Its skating rink was empty. And the boats that drifted across its ornamental lake were bereft of skylarking boys and girls. Session Road was similarly deserted. Only his memories rendered the city familiar. Memories of what it had once meant to be happy.

"It's the *lobo* that are the worst," she said at last.

"There's nothing out there," he said. "The whole place is dead."

She began shifting her weight from one leg to the other. "Can we go now?" She had become petulant, her voice a whine. "I said can we *go* now?" She took a few steps forward, brushed her hair free of her eyes, and gazed back at him, accusingly. She took another step. "Please," she said.

He strode after her. What he could not see he felt. The city was not dead. It lived. And if he lingered he feared that what was invisible might well become manifest.

The compound stood at the end of Francisco Street, a narrow, dirt road leading off Legarda. The gate had been left open. It creaked, as if the shadows that swirled about these parts had the power to disturb the air. Nervously, he slipped between the iron jambs.

Once within the perimeter, he was immediately met with a dismal prospect of neglect. The courtyard was strewn with dead leaves; the stables were empty; and couch grass covered what had once been carefully tended gardens. He walked on until the house loomed above him, its eaves swathed in the imperiousness of the night. For an instant, he thought to call out a hello, then thought better of it. Instead, he cautiously proceeded to a window, rubbed the pane clean with his sleeve, then peered inside.

"I'm hungry," said Zsa Zsa, whom he had half forgotten.

"Shh!" The interior teased his eye. The shadows, so darkly luminous in the open air, had, in invading the house, seemingly reverted to their customary role as agents of obscurity. He proceeded to the front door, Zsa Zsa close upon his heels.

"Is anyone at home?" she called, in the singsong voice she sometimes affected. It still had the power to unsettle him, however much he had come to hear in it the tones of a lonely, forsaken child. But he did not think to quiet her again. Even before he had taken out his key and found that the lock remained unchanged, he had known that he would find the house empty.

He opened the door and stepped into the hall. It was as he had remembered it; the drawing room, too. He moved through the house, upstairs and down, and discovered nothing, apart from dust, cobwebs and the carcasses of mice and cockroaches, to suggest that anything had ever been remiss. But Pia was gone.

Entering his old study, he disburdened himself of the sword and propped it against a bookcase. Then he flung his cloak in a corner and collapsed into a chair. Idly, he swivelled through 360 degrees, his boots knocking over piles of books and manuscripts.

He dug a heel into the rug and came to a halt facing the desk. A globe stood there, the ancient power blocs of Europa, Atlantis, Cathay, and Afric picked out in pink, blue, yellow, and black. A quill lay on a blotter, a sheet of paper next to it. He picked the paper up. The hastily written message was no longer decipherable. It was spattered with Pia's tears.

He let his farewell note drop to the floor. He stared at it, time distending to accommodate the fulsomeness of his despair.

He had been so lost in thought that when he became conscious of another presence in the room he had almost expected to be confronted by an avenging ghost. He swung the chair about. Zsa Zsa stood before him.

"You're not human either," she said, looking at him as if for the first time. She pressed her knuckles to her mouth. "Are you?"

"There're not many humans left."

"But you've *never* been human."

He smiled. "I'm a servitor. I was made by the Nephilim."

She went to the desk, reached up and spun the globe on its axis. He put out a hand and stilled it. Europa lay beneath his index finger. "Look: there's Venezia. And Praha, too, of course. Human cities, just like Baguio used to be." His finger tracked eastwards to settle upon the continent that had been poised to supercede the old power blocs and bring civilization back to the Earth: Lemuria, his homeland. "I was supposed to protect humanity. How strange, after all the fighting, to discover that I had it in myself to cut and run."

He sat back. The chaos in which he had left his study swam into focus: books and manuscripts, manuscripts and books – the accumulated nonsense of a lifetime.

Zsa Zsa was holding the piece of paper he had earlier discarded. Though the note was virtually unreadable, she studied it with what threatened to be an intuitive grasp of its essentials.

"Didn't you have a little girl?" she said. "Didn't you have a little girl like me?" The silence deepened, punctuated only by the faint sound of her breathing.

They set off into the city.

On leaving the house a strange euphoria had seized him. And however much he distrusted it he found it impossible to resist surrendering to a sense of impending release. The Dark had begun to invade his mind. Soon, he would change. The prospect had once been fearful. But the shadows had lost much of their power to intimidate. Sometimes, they even awakened veneration and awe. He narrowed his eyes, attempting to gaze deeper into the night. His steps became purposeful, almost eager, and Zsa Zsa, who had been skipping a few paces ahead, struggled to keep pace.

They walked up Del Pilar, crossed Kisad Road, and then entered Burnham Park. He and Pia had often taken walks here, particularly in the early evening. They would stroll, arm in arm, she nestled against him for warmth. They would buy *bucayo* and fried bananas. There had been bicycles with sidecars for rent. She would enjoy

driving him round the lake. After they were through, he would take her to the funfair, where she lost money on games of chance and screamed with pleasure as they bumped along the antiquated, rather sad, little rides.

Leaving the park, he led Zsa Zsa up Calderon Street and into Session Road. His nape began to tingle. As the shadows had become less threatening, the more had he become sensible of something lurking within their depths. Something that, if presently beyond the bounds of perception, would be revealed when his faculties became more exposed to the Dark.

He stopped outside a *carinderia*. Its tureens had been overturned. Zsa Zsa cast a hungry glance over tables, floor and counter. But whatever food had been left behind had long been scavenged. On the opposite side of the road was a steep flight of steps.

"They're hiding," said Zsa Zsa.

He looked up towards the old coach-house and then down towards the market. The shadows churned, as if about to turn themselves inside out. He stared into the intermediate darkness, trying to resolve the blur of abstract forms into constituents that might be recognizable as something once human.

He stepped into the road. A few rickshaws stood idle. A burnt-out *calèche* lay on its side. The silence was as all-pervasive as the shadows.

The steps led to Baguio Cathedral. They began to climb. "Do you hide, too?" he said.

"When I first saw you I was hiding," she said. "It's not so easy out there at the edge. The shadows are thin. If you're not careful you just sort of... fall out of them." She wound a finger about a filthy lock of hair. "I'm not frightened of the things the others are, though. The light hurts. But I'm not *frightened* of it."

They reached the summit. He paused to sit down on the low wall that bordered the forecourt.

The area had once been populated by vendors selling flowers, balloons, newspapers, sweepstake tickets, rosary beads, and candles. With Pia, he had bought candles for the Lady Chapel during Holy Week. He had even shared her prayers, when deliverance had simply meant that they should learn to be kinder to each other.

He felt unaccountably hot. He fumbled with the silver clasp that secured the cloak to his shoulders. The folds of broadcloth fanned out over the ground.

His lungs snatched at air. It was as if he were climbing another set of steps, ones that led up into the sky and into the depths of the black sun. He pressed the heel of his hand against his forehead. The cathedral lay at the city's heart. Here, he was at the core of the umbra, the still point round which the darkness eddied and milled. The silence was almost overwhelming. He massaged the back of his neck and gazed up at the rose-coloured towers. The black sun beat down remorselessly.

Zsa Zsa began to sing. And as she sang, she danced. He sighed. Her dancing became livelier, almost frenetic. "Please," he said. When she ignored him, he raised his voice. "*Stop!*"

She came to a dead halt. She stared at him.

"I'm changing," he said, with a moan.

If he had originally come to Baguio to work out his own fate, then he had returned to reaffirm it. For it seemed to him that fate had always had one thing, and one thing alone, in store: that he should become as a shadow amongst the shadows.

On returning to the compound he had taken to his bed and slept for nearly 48 hours. When he woke he could not recall where he was. He lay still, lest he place himself in jeopardy. He might be in Maynilad, in one of the bedchambers reserved for servitors of the court. He might be in his mentor's house, or on one of the ships out of Luzon, Mindoro, Palawan and Negros that had provided him with his apprenticeship. He might be in Venezia resting after the victory that had secured the trade routes between East and West. Or he might be in Baguio, high in the mountains of the Central Cordillera, with the woman he loved by his side. As his pupils dilated, and the shadows resolved to reveal wardrobe, chiffonier, night table and commode, he remembered. And however much, turning on his side and staring at the vacant pillow next to him, he thought upon the Baguio he had known, he understood he was inextricably bound to this Baguio of shadows and loss.

With determined effort he swung his legs over the side of the bed and got to his feet.

His head was muzzy. A darkness brooded there. Something seemed ready to hatch from his overheated thoughts. His pupils dilated the more. From deep within himself came a corresponding, if purely metaphysical, enlargement of his powers of discernment. The shadows were no longer anonymous. They possessed individual geometries. They responded to a new-found sympathy of his mind and soul. Where there had once been chaos he now perceived a dark order.

"Santiago?"

Slowly, he turned. A woman stood in the doorway. She was dressed in rags.

It was Pia.

"What are you doing here, Santiago?" He had so recently emerged from sleep, and the encounter was so dreamlike, that he froze, as still as he had been a few minutes earlier. As then, he wondered where he might be. But this time he was less concerned about which city, island, or even continent he might find himself in, than in discovering that he had left the familiar world entirely. "Why come back when it's too late?" she added.

He had slept in his clothes. The clothes felt heavy, like diseased skin he could not slough off. "If you can't forgive me, I'll understand," he said, composing himself as best he could. "But I'll not go away. Not again."

"You don't fear the Dark?" she said. "You should, Santiago."

And much as he wondered that he could see her, and that his journey into the night was at an end, he turned away, unable to tolerate her scrutiny. "Can I hope, or are these shadows I've returned to to be like the ones I've tried to leave behind?" Gingerly, he once more faced her.

She walked towards him, pale as death. Her eyes were bloodshot. And each time she opened her ruby lips the fangs that served her appetite glinted in the incandes-

cent dark.

When they stood toe to toe she opened her mouth as wide as she was seemingly able. A low growl escaped from the back of her throat. Her mouth closed. The brittle sound of her teeth snapping together echoed throughout the room. Her face was transformed. Not into the semblance of monstrosity that he was anticipating, but into the one thing he truly feared.

"Why you leave me?" Eyes, nose, brow, mouth were contorted into a mask of betrayed innocence. She pounded his chest with her fists. "Why you leave me alone?" Her voice had become childlike. Always, when the tears came, her fluency of tongue was compromised along with her womanhood. "Why you not take me with you?" She stopped beating him and pressed a cheek against his palpitating heart.

He put his arms round her waist and began to rock her. "I'm sorry," he said, softly. "I'm back now. I'm back to stay." He nuzzled the top of her head. "I swear to God."

She broke from his embrace and sat down on the edge of the bed. She seemed to have put on ten, maybe 15, years. "What about the things you said in your letter?" She gazed down at the floor.

"I was angry," he said. *And frightened*, he thought. *Not of the Dark, but of you, Pia, of you.* In thinking of the past, and of how it had had a tendency to repeat itself, with him swearing that all would be forgotten, and that they would make a new start, he could not help tasting a little of the old bitterness.

She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. He took a step forward and stooped, looking into her downturned face to try to gauge the depth of her sorrow and whether it might encompass a change of heart. Quickly, she looked up, leant forward and kissed him.

"I love you," she said. A wave of terrible sweetness washed over his head. It did not matter if she spoke with candour or lied. He wished to drown. He wished to descend into dark, warm depths and leave the memories of her unfaithfulness on the surface. His life would, he knew, from this moment on, find meaning only in this: that this woman would always be cared for.

"This isn't our room," she said, bringing him smartly down to earth. She turned her head this way and that, gazing into the bedchamber's four corners.

"Our room's occupied," he said. "We have a guest. She's sleeping."

"She?"

He sat down next to her and then lay back. He stared at the ceiling. He smiled. It was a smile of pleasure. He had not smiled in such a way for a long time.

"You'll like her," he said. "You wanted a baby, didn't you?"

"A baby, Santiago?" Her face shone. She seemed a parody of herself: someone accustomed to expect little of life who had been given an unexpectedly lavish gift.

He began to laugh. What an absurd place the world was, he thought. But if it could be absurdly cruel, its darkness was shot through with light. Why? He could not think. It was unnecessary. As unnecessary as Being itself. His laughter grew uproarious. Pia fell upon him. She was laughing, too.

And if in considering how, not only his own life, but perhaps, more importantly, hers, had turned out, he felt a deep regret, he no longer felt despair.

He lifted the pannikin and poured a little water into each of the bone-china cups. The water was brownish but wonderfully cool. The three of them sat outside, gazing up at the ball of black fire that confused night with day and day with night.

"What do we do now?" said Zsa Zsa.

"This is our home," he said. "We stay."

Zsa Zsa turned to Pia. "But won't they come for us?"

Pia did not reply. Santiago shot her an enquiring look. Then he turned to the child. "There's no reason to think –"

"Unfortunately," interrupted Pia, "there's every reason." She put down her cup. "The others will be jealous. They'll want us back." She frowned, her pupils mirroring the shadows that swarmed across the courtyard so that they glittered as if with a thousand diminutive candle-flames of inverted light.

"What's wrong?" he said.

Pia raised a finger to her lips.

He strained to hear. But he was aware only of the dull thud of his own pulse. Then, without warning, his head was filled with the same black light that shone from her eyes and he felt himself teetering on the verge of comprehension. He pulled back, unwilling to suffer a fall.

"I heard my own voice," he gasped, "speaking as if it were another. And, oh God, it was saying, it was saying –"

He felt a hand on his arm.

"You've been under a lot of stress, Santiago," said Pia. "We all have. And soon, we'll have to start looking for food. It's better we rest."

She got up and led him inside.

Zsa Zsa slept at their feet.

"What's that?" he said, snapping awake.

Zsa Zsa sat bolt upright. "The bad things," she said.

Such had been his haste that he stood in the courtyard with only a pair of sandals, a loincloth and the melancholy blade, *Il Penseroso*. The main gates were locked, and his women were inside the house, their ears, he hoped, still echoing with his barked command to bolt all doors and windows.

He scurried to the water tower and clambered up its rungs until he stood upon the midmost platform. The position afforded him an uninterrupted view over the compound's walls. He hunkered, the stinking copper tank above him, his ears pricked to detect the slightest sound.

He focused on the street outside. The banks of shadows moved, and the shadows that eclipsed his mind began a dance of reciprocity. In front of the gate stood a man. The man stared up at him. Directly behind, in a long line that ringed the compound, over a hundred other pairs of eyes did likewise.

When he had left the city enough people had either changed, or begun to change, for his dreams to be thereafter plagued by the faces of *aswang* and *manananggal*. Faces such as now looked up into his own. *Aswang*, he

knew, were capable of emitting an odour, or scent, that immobilized their victims so that they might be more easily devoured. *Manananggal* were headless beings said to prey upon the unborn. He had no names for the other creatures that besieged his house: creatures feathered, scaled, sometimes huge, sometimes tiny. Except for those that Zsa Zsa had warned him were the worst of their kind: the *lobo*.

"My name is Joseph," said the man who stood to the fore. He was not like the others. Pale, with two small fangs hanging over his lip, like those that characterized Pia and Zsa Zsa's metamorphosis, he was otherwise human. The long black robe that reached to his ankles was emblematic of authority. This, it seemed, was the leader of the ghastly band. "Surrender the woman and child," said the shadow-spawn, in measured, affectless tones.

"They stay," returned Santiago.

Joseph's bloodless lips set in a smile. "I do not believe you understand the danger you place yourself in. Has your wife satisfied her hunger yet? Are you sure you truly wish to be with her when her appetite pricks her beyond endurance? It has been a long time." He extended his arms to indicate the creatures who stood to either side of him, a naked rabble devoid of even rags such as Pia and Zsa Zsa had worn when they had stepped out of the Dark. "A long time for her. A long time for all my people." An animal-like snuffling rose from the ranks of his woe-begone retinue. "You do not belong here, servitor."

"You know what I am?"

"Of course. You are one of the whores of the Nephilim. And just as they must pass from the Earth, so must you. The Dark will spread across the continents, and a new Earth will arise from its shadows. Send them out. Let us put an end to this now."

"No, let's concentrate on the essentials. I shall kill any man – any *thing* – that enters this compound. There, is that clear enough for you?"

Joseph shrugged. "You are a made creature. You have changed. But the Dark takes no delight in your singular perversion." He clapped his hands. "For the time being, you may go free."

"Why?" Santiago shot back. "Why me, and not them?"

Joseph began to chuckle. "If those such as you see before you are creations of the Dark, then it is equally true that the Dark is the creation of humanity. Surely you must understand this?" Santiago understood. He had lately discovered things about himself that he had previously suspected to exist only in those he impersonated. Joseph folded his arms across his chest. "The new sun is but the image of Man's black heart, the ghostly essence of his mortal remains. And I tell you this: when humankind has completely transformed itself and forged a great army of the night, it will fall upon those whom you call gods, and tear them limb from limb. And the Nephilim will be no more."

Santiago assumed his full height and placed the tip of the sword between his outspread feet. "If human beings hunger for darkness, then they also hunger for the light. This is my home," he said. "I stay. And so does my wife and child."

Joseph took a step backwards and merged with the monstrous herd. "You have made your choice, servitor," he said, signing to the creatures that stood to either side of him. Several of the shadow-spawn leapt across the road and began to scale the gates.

Santiago readied himself.

The first trespasser pulled itself over the top of the gate and jumped. It landed inside the courtyard. Immediately, it raced towards the water tower on all fours. Santiago hefted *Il Penseroso* above his head. The creature held up a hand. The naked steel had reflected a ray of black light directly into its eyes.

Seizing the opportunity, and careless of the drop, Santiago cast himself into space.

He cried out. Whether it was in bloody anticipation of battle, or in dismay at facing ridiculous odds, he did not have time to consider. He knew only that his holler had compounded the effect of the blinding light and brought the creature sufficiently to a halt for the soles of his sandalled feet to impact squarely across its spine.

He rolled across the flagstones, the sword throwing up a tangle of sparks, then rose in one fluid movement that put the lie to his advancing years.

The thing was stunned. Possibly its back was broken. It lay on its side, its ribcage heaving, dark blood trickling from its mouth. He would have finished it off, but now that he saw for the first time what it was, he found himself rooted, unable, for the moment, to take the initiative. In place of a human head was the head of a large dog. Black hair covered the hide. And wickedly hooked claws extended from hands and feet that doubled as the paws of a quadruped.

A dozen more *lobo* dropped from the gate and its adjacent walls and landed inside the compound.

He advanced on them.

Il Penseroso was some five feet long. A scroll, representative of an infernal calligraphy, ran along its length: the tattoo of a lithe, silver-limbed demon. The sword sang through the air, parting the shadows as a razor might a black chiffon veil. Yelping, a dog-man scampered out of range of the deadly arc. Its companion was not so lucky. As the thing had closed in, rising up on its hind legs to try to sink its teeth into the servitor's entrails, the finely-honed blade had severed its head. The backswing caught another as it tried to take advantage of his open guard. It too was summarily decapitated.

If momentarily daunted by the swift vengeance dealt out to their companions, the remainder of the pack lost no more than a few seconds before launching a concerted attack.

Il Penseroso glowed. It was an orc-blade. It had been taken from the chieftain he had defeated in personal combat on the shores of the Adriatic. Its metal had been forged in the Netherworld.

The *lobo* stopped in their tracks. Their eyes widened. The sword no longer reflected the light of the black sun, but was radiant with its own dark energy. When he had rallied his troops and stormed the hell-mouth outside Venezia, *Il Penseroso* had glowed with the same fire. And he had known that he would lift the siege, force his ene-

mies back into their hole and emerge victorious. For a man does not fear hell who has hell on his side. The glow became stronger. It seemed to sing. It filled his mind with a blazing light that told the tale of forgotten millennia, when the Nephilim had not yet come into the world, and only men and orcs – those mutations that had once been men – inhabited an age of the perverse. And it sang, too, of even more ancient days, before man had become divided from himself, and when the Earth belonged to humanity alone. Everything flowed from that ancient time, orcs, Nephilim, and those the Nephilim had made to repopulate the Earth: the fay, the houri, the merfolk and wyverns, as well as more privileged, if subservient, races, such as his own. Everything emanated from the human. He knew that now. Everything. Both darkness and light. The hellish brilliance that burned within him seemed to connect him to the planet's life source, an underworld that predicated the more literal redoubt of the orcs, a place contradictory, joyous, tragic, that was the reality behind his own human mask.

He and the sword became one. He swung it two-handed, then jabbed, so that it both cleaved and pinked at the hysterical mass of writhing, snapping flesh; he whipped it about his head, one hand only, to bring its edge down upon a canine skull. If, in Venezia, he had been a man who had turned a hell-blade against its makers, here, in the city of shadows, he had become a creature of hell himself. And one in rebellion against the darkness that had created him.

He scythed through hide and bone. Muzzles yawned, frothy with gore and phlegm. A fine red mist obscured his vision; a visceral rain spattered about his feet. Limbs and heads rolled across the courtyard and tumbled through space. The shadows themselves seemed ready to howl.

As if coming out of a trance, he discovered that the blade no longer connected with living matter, and he brought it crashing down onto the flagstones. Its notched edge seemed to ignite the surrounding air, so that for a moment the sword displayed a halo of dark, sultry fire. Gasping, he surveyed the carnage.

The mantle of darkness swirled, then, as if coalescing round its wounds, became still.

The sword no longer glowed.

He heard a door open. He turned. Pia stood looking through the crack between door and jamb. Zsa Zsa was behind her.

"They've gone," he said, still fighting for breath. "For a while, at least." He made a wry smile. "I've long wished for a secluded life. It seems at last I'm to get it. Though I somehow feel I won't enjoy the degree of quiet from my neighbours that a retired soldier may reasonably expect."

Pia hurried to his side. He put a blood-slicked arm round her waist. They walked to the door, his wrist through the leather strap that snaked from the sword's pommel. *Il Penseroso* dragged behind them, clanking over the stones.

"But what do we do now?" said Zsa Zsa, who waited for them in the doorway.

"We try to survive," he said. "There's no use running away. Even if we *could* leave, running would get us

nowhere." It had got him nowhere. He knew that. Nowhere except a country of shame – the country of those cowards who cannot forgive, and who, if they linger too long in those cold, foreign parts, will themselves be unforgiven. "The darkness – the darkness lies in ourselves," he continued. "The ghosts of humanity's past have come back to haunt us and lay waste to the world. To what purpose, I don't know. Perhaps the Dark has no purpose. Perhaps it wishes nothing more than to purge the universe of hope and light. But I do know we've only been given a reprieve. We must build our defences. The shadows will spread out across all the Earth. Not just from this city, but from other human cities, too. We must prepare for the Great Night."

A few feet from the door, Pia halted. She took his face in her hands. "Can you trust me, Santiago? I'm sure we both remember how things used to be. Is it possible for us to forget the past?"

He looked away, gazing up at the black sun, the great portal of despondency and fear.

"We're destined to live here for a long time," he said. "For all our lives, perhaps." He looked down into the sweet face of the woman he knew he did not, could not, love. The darkness called to him, the shadows in his mind singing of her treachery and deceit. But she was the light. And whatever had passed between them could not extinguish that light. Just as his sword had acknowledged him its lord, and had slain his enemies, its own dark power harnessed to his will, so now his shadow-self proclaimed that it was the servant of the one who stood before him. And he knew he was no longer afraid of the Dark.

"But can you *trust* me?" she said.

He stood on the threshold. Not for the first time he told himself he was a fool. But debate was futile. He clasped her in his arms.

Zsa Zsa stepped forward. "You *are* human, Santiago," said the child in an earnest whisper. "You are human. You are, you are..." And then she pressed her face against his thigh.

His eyelids drooped, hungry for sleep. He let them close, shutting out the shadows. He felt himself being led into the house. And in his dream-heavy mind, they seemed to be walking down the mountain road into the penumbra. The clouds opened. Earth's day poured through and chased away the night. There was no pain. The pain had vanished, along with guilt, recrimination and all the other reminders of the past.

"Can I trust you?" he said. "Of course. I'm home, aren't I?"

They walked through the doorway.

They walked into the light.

Richard Calder's most recent books are *Impakto* (2001) and *Lord Soho* (2002). An *Interzone* discovery (class of 1989), he has published many stories in these pages, the most recent of which was "Zarzuela" (issue 178). An interview with him appeared in our issue 170. After long spells in the Far East, he currently lives once more in his native Essex.

Old Tingo's Penis

Geoffrey A. Landis

You have to understand that we Dhameo people were here first. The other people came here later – we don't know where they came from, they just showed up – but we Dhameo were first, so we know stories from the old days, like the story of how old Tingo lost his penis.

Back in those days, things weren't like they are now. There was some weird shit in those days. For example, back then men didn't have any penises yet. Nothing, just a flat spot between their legs. The women had to make their fun with each other, but since they didn't have anything to compare to, that was okay.

Old Tingo wasn't a god – nobody had heard about gods yet in those days, that's something the people who showed up later told us about. But old Tingo was sure some old; he could remember back before there were any other people, before there were any mountains or rivers or trees, back when there was nothing of the world but grey fog. Yes, there are a lot of stories about old Tingo. Anyway, one day old Tingo decided that he would make himself a penis. It was a little thing, about the size of a peanut, but old Tingo was pretty pleased with himself, and went around showing it off to all the women. "What's that?" the women would ask, and old Tingo would say, "It's a new thing, I made it myself." And then the woman might ask, "What's it good for?" and old Tingo would offer to demonstrate.

After a while, that woman Aminea came to hear about old Tingo's new thing, and she went over to see Tingo and ask him about it. Now, Aminea was not old like Tingo, but she knew a thing or two, and right as soon as she saw it, she could figure out what it would be good for. But she pretended she didn't know, and she got old Tingo to demonstrate for her, and she thought,

yes, this is a good thing. And afterwards, she said to Tingo, this is a good thing you have made up, you should let me borrow it for a while. And Tingo wasn't sure that this would be a smart idea, but he couldn't think of a good reason to say no, and besides, right then he was feeling all relaxed, so he gave it to her and said, please take care of it, and be sure you don't lose it.

So that clever woman Aminea used Tingo's penis for a while, and after a while she loaned it to one of the other women, and you know how it goes, they passed it around from one to another to another. Then after a few days Aminea had an idea, and she found who had the penis and borrowed it back, and then what did she do but go and hide it.

So when old Tingo came to see Aminea, and asked for his penis back, she told him, oh, it was around somewhere, but she didn't remember where it was. Old Tingo started to get a little mad, but Aminea knew how to deal with him, and she told him what a good thing that penis he had made was, and why doesn't he make another one? But this time, she added, he should make it a little bigger, so it wouldn't be so easy to lose.

So old Tingo made himself another penis, this one about as big as your little finger, and he was mighty proud of it, too. He told himself, this one is even better than the first one I made, and the women he demonstrated it to all agreed. And after a while he had to go brag to that clever woman Aminea about how good it was, and she said to herself, yes, this is a very good thing. And afterwards, she said to Tingo, this is a good thing you have made up, if you could let me borrow it for a while, I promise I won't lose it this time. And she remembered not to laugh when she said this, because of course she had no intention of returning it.

So old Tingo gave her the penis, and she passed it

around to her friends, and then after a while, when she thought old Tingo might be coming back for it, she went and hid it with the first one. And old Tingo came, and she told him, oh, it's around here somewhere, but I can't remember where I put it. Why don't you make another one for yourself, but make it just a little bigger, so it won't be so easy to misplace.

So old Tingo made another one, this one maybe as big as your thumb, and he said to himself, wow, this one is better than either of the other ones. And, of course, clever Aminea lost that one too, and so he made another one a little bigger, and another one, and another one.

After a while Aminea had a whole collection of old Tingo's penises, and it was more than enough to please her every night of the year, but she was curious how far old Tingo would go. He made a penis as big as your arm, and then made one as big as the trunk of a palm tree. Fortunately clever Aminea had been around for a while, and knew the trick of expanding herself up to make herself bigger (she could shrink herself down like a mouse, too, but that's for another story), so she still had a good time with old Tingo even when his penis was as big as the thickest, highest tree trunk, and he had to stagger just to carry it around.

"But these are just little things, old Tingo," she told him. "Why don't you make one that's a decent size, big enough that it won't get lost?"

And old Tingo resolved, I'm going to make myself a penis that's big enough that not even absent-minded Aminea is not going to lose it.

So he made himself a penis that was, oh, I don't know, maybe a mile high, and almost as thick. It was so big he couldn't carry it around, he had to dig a hole and lie on his back with the penis sticking up in the air, and he couldn't even move. Maybe this penis is a little too big, he thought, but wait until that absent-minded Aminea asks to borrow it, then she can have it, and just let her try to lose this one.

So after a while that clever Aminea came, and she saw old Tingo's penis – she could hardly miss it, you could see it a hundred miles away – and she thought, now this is a real penis, yes, but where is old Tingo?

But she liked the new penis, and she rubbed it, and after a while it did what a penis does. But what shot out of that penis was lava, and quite a lot of it, too. It really made quite a mess. So she thought, no, I don't like this penis quite as well, I really think Tingo went too far on this one. So she went away.

And old Tingo, he was in quite a bit of trouble, buried underneath that enormous penis, and under all that lava, which solidified into a mountain right there on top of him, and I don't know how long it took him to wiggle himself out again. I guess he was plenty mad, and it took him a long time before he could see what a funny joke that clever Aminea had played on him.

So when he got over getting mad he went to Aminea, and Aminea was so sorry for him that she let him have one of his penises back, and he picked one that

wasn't too big, and wasn't too small, really the one that's just in the middle, the best one, and he took it and stuck it back on, and told her that he wasn't going to give away his penis any more. Women were plenty welcome to borrow it, he said, but they'd have to use it right there stuck to him where it wouldn't get lost. And Aminea decided, well, that wasn't such a bad idea.

She still had all those other penises that old Tingo had made, even if old Tingo had taken the one that was just the right size, so she took those others and gave them away. There were just enough that every man could get one, although some got ones that are just tiny little things, no bigger than a peanut, and some got ones that are just way too big.

So that's how come, if you look at men's penises, they are all different, some little and some big, and none of them ever think that their penis is just the right size.

And old Tingo? He has the one that's just the right size. And I know that there are a lot of women still looking for it, too.

Geoffrey A. Landis, who lives in Berea, Ohio, has won several awards for his short work in *Asimov's SF* and elsewhere. He has appeared in *Interzone* five times before – with "Jamais Vu" (issue 45), "Paradigms of Change" (issue 53), "In the Land of Purple Flowers" (issue 60), "Dark Lady" (issue 98) and "Turnover" (issue 115). An interview with him appeared in our issue 120, and since then his long-awaited debut novel has appeared – *Mars Crossing* (2000).

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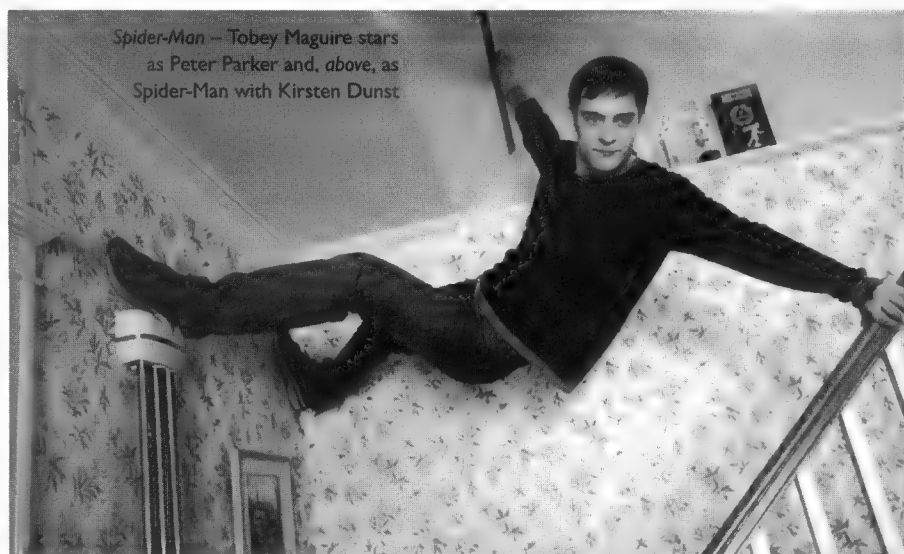


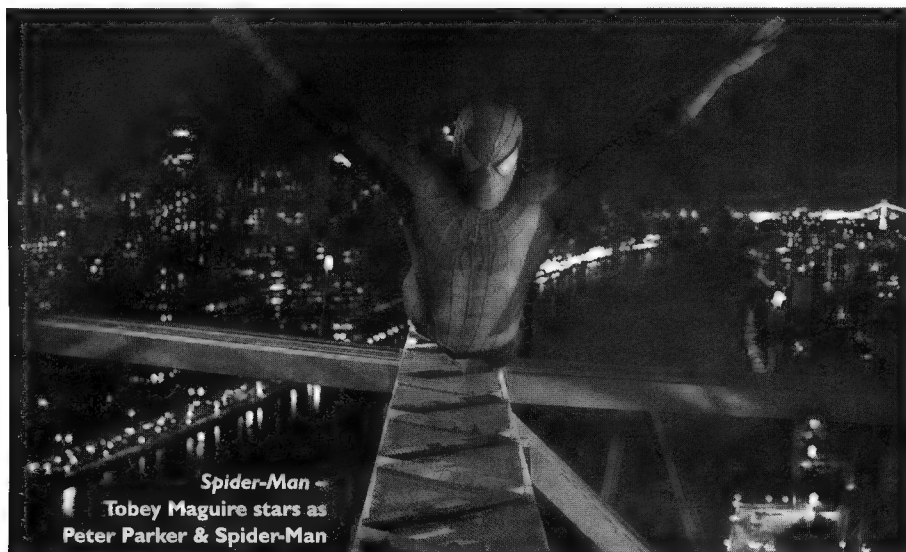
Development hell is a lot like the Marvel universe: an ever-changing chaos of revision and reinvention towards an end that never comes, leaving an intractable excess of narrative possibilities in the rich embarrassment of characters and narratives from different generations of the story. If *Spider-Man*'s own 40-year career hasn't been quite so prolific of deviant narratives as the sprawling *X-Men* mythos, it's still left some tricky choices of casting and life situation, massively compounded in this case by the years in rewrite gaol. Like any film that's been a decade too long in development, what's left is a collection of plot fragments from earlier versions that no longer quite join up, haunted by the drifting eidola of characters and storylines from earlier generations of the saga. Thus is it that Betty Brant (Peter's original squeeze throughout the Ditko years) has a cameo in the film, but nothing whatever to do. JJJ's crusade against Spider-Man no longer plays any detectable role in the plot – a problem acknowledged but not solved by the post-911 reshoot inserting a chorus of ordinary New Yorkers cheering the beleaguered hero on against the terrorist at the climax. And there are bleeding wounds in the narrative where tens of pages seem to have been torn out: the bit where Pete and Harry Osborn find a cool loft-share together;

the science day-job Peter finds and loses in a single line ("I was late for work again and Dr Connors fired me").

The general outline of the script's long history is reasonably well documented. The final version, sole-credited to David Koepp, is extremely close in general outline to James Cameron's original 1991 "scriptment" for Carolco, which based itself closely around the Lee/Ditko origin episode and expertly cracked the fundamental problems of adapting that narrative to a shapely movie structure. Many scenes from this first Cameron version survive in the finished film, and it's no

secret that some of the less fanboy-friendly changes were Cameron's innovation – notably the now-GM spider (it's the new radioactivity!) and, especially, the organic webshooters, which made fuller sense within Cameron's originally franker allegory of icky adolescent secretions. While the rights war ground on, however, Cameron himself spent a long period, much of the early '90s, with a succession of co-writers obsessively after-thinking, unpicking, and finally ruining everything that was worthwhile about his first version. Villains, girlfriends, settings came and went.





Spider-Man
Tobey Maguire stars as
Peter Parker & Spider-Man

Electro and the Sandman (the original antagonists) became Dr Octopus; Liz Allan briefly displaced MJ; the back-drop shifted from the high-school years of the Ditko era to the college setting of the John Romita stint; the tone moved from earnest and dark to jokey and stupid. The last extant Cameron draft, dating to 1993, is a shockingly awful travesty, hard to credit as the work of the author of the original treatment.

And the great strength of the Koepp version, for all its unhealed scars, is that it does at least rip up all the later drafts, going right back instead to Cameron's first and best thoughts. The one major rethink is the no-brainer decision to ditch previous nemesis candidates in favour of the Green Goblin, easily the best in the series of largely rubbish Stan Lee villains churned out in the title's first year; and even here, much of Cameron's Electro remains in his characterization. Certainly Cameron's first instincts about the strengths of the material are vindicated: the power of vertigo as a cinematic hook; Spider-Man's iconic status as the pioneer of the troubled teenage superhero struggling with girls, peer issues, elderly dependants, money troubles, and shortness of sleep owing to those long nights shinning up buildings. "Hopefully," he noted solemnly in his 1991 treatment, "this will be seen correctly as a metaphor for puberty and its awakening of primal drives." But the secret of *Spider-Man's* bite was always that it was about more than just the changes of adolescence; it was *the* title that spoke to the life of the comics fan, coolly measuring the gap between his everyday life and his fantasies, and offering reassurance that his daytime existence as a four-eyed virgin was not necessarily more defining of his true self than the garish process-colour life of his dreams.

Cameron's own drafts were never

able successfully to bridge the gap in tone and credibility between the human grit and the silly cartoon villainy, and the Koepp/Raimi version hasn't entirely solved the problem, though at least they had the foresight to relocate the ending before rather than after it became needful. (Rumours later got confused; it was Cameron's own first version that made the Twin Towers its key location and the setting for its climax, as part of an attempt to do for heights what his major transbudgetary *folies de grandeur* did for water.) The backyard world of Forest Hills are sensitively rendered, but the very choice of the Goblin as antagonist commits the whole project to an off-the-shelf *Batman* model of star actor playing hammy villain and upstaging the lycra off the lead, and the embarrassment expresses itself at moments of extreme ridiculousness in a depressing resort to tired postmodern nudges. ("You never know when some lunatic will come along with the sadistic choice: save the woman you love, or suffer the little children.")

Yet it's arguable that *Spider-Man* of

all comics has always been about the irresolubility of this conflict, and that Raimi and team know precisely what they're doing. The film's ending, in particular, moves significantly beyond the pat Hollywood clinches of previous drafts to an utterly authentic Marvel outcome, in which the hero and heroine find some contrived long-running motivation to keep their smouldering feelings under tantalizing control for years and years at a go. And here as throughout, Koepp's romantic dialogue is so magnificently dreadful that you genuinely can't tell bad writing from knowing teenage inarticulacy: "There's only one man who's always been there for me, who makes me feel that I'm more than I could be, that I'm just me. And that's ok." Those last four words may be genius or drivel, but it's a mighty Marvel seal of authenticity that it honestly doesn't make a whole lot of difference which.

Fidelity to source means more, of course, in the case of true classics like *Spider-Man* than it does with minor works of genre fiction from the wrong century but one. If you make small couturial adjustments to Spider-Man's leotard, it's dogturds in the mailbox; yet while *The Time Machine* wears the Wells name like a celebrity endorsement, boasting not only an opening based-on credit to HG but a director from the master's direct bloodline, its direct debt to the 1895 novella is nil. Its real origins are tucked away in the end credit "Based on the Screenplay by David Duncan," the 1950s sf novelist whose lone remembered novel now is *Occam's Razor*, but who more famously wrote the 1960 George Pal version; and the 2002 film is straightforwardly a remake of the Duncan/Pal version, cheerfully reincarnating many of the added characters, but slashing most of Duncan's own careful links to HG's original narrative.



Spider-Man
Willem Dafoe stars as
Norman Osborne &
The Green Goblin

The Time Machine – Alexander, played by Guy Pearce engages in a life-and-death struggle the Uber-Morlock, played by Jeremy Irons

Below – Out of the frying pan, as it were, Alexander proposes marriage to the love of his life Emma, played by Sienna Guillory

The key figure in this saga of creative misappropriation is not director Simon Wells – who was famously locked out of studio reshoots – but writer and co-producer John Logan, best known up to now as Ridley Scott's favourite rewrite man. In Logan's defence, it has to be said that this isn't the most comfortable job in Hollywood, and it would be unfair to judge Logan (who's now written *Star Trek X*) on his hired-hand work for a director with one of the most notorious track records for tearing up great scripts and then engaging hapless third parties to try and sellotape the pieces back together. All the same, it's a matter of open record that it was Logan who revised David Franzoni's witty, imaginative, historically sophisticated satire *Gladiator* into a formulaic, dim-witted patchwork of Hollywood hero clichés (only very partially rescued when Logan was sacked on the eve of filming and William Nicholson brought into sort out the mess); and Mark Protosevich's celebrated first draft of *I am Legend* also passed through Logan's hands, before Logan was fired in his turn and Protosevich bemusedly rehired, an all too familiar kind of narrative in the life-cycle of Ridley Scott productions. On the evidence to date, Logan's key professional strength is a clear-eyed readiness to sacrifice historical fidelity and intelligence to mainstream entertainment values, and his take on Duncan on Wells is something of a study in time travel in itself: the struggle of a boxed-in, historically witless 2002 studio sensibility to turn a great past mind's big ideas about human nature and destiny into something that will make recognizable emotional sense to trainer-footed kids with popcorn for brains.

The problems go way back. For the young Wells, the Time Traveller's quest was driven by a passionate concern for history both as an object of

inquiry and as a scientific process: the long-term future of the human species, and its shaping by the forces of technological change and industrial transformation of society which appeared to the late Victorian socialist as the dominant forces determining the destiny of the world. Crucially, the schism of humanity into Morlocks and Eloi was for Wells a direct product of the tensions created by industrially-driven divisions of labour and class, and the long-term outlook for humanity bleak. All this was already too far down in the pink end of the spectrum even for 1959, so Duncan's version ditched this for a future shaped by quite different forces of history, interpolating a nuclear apocalypse into the story (scheduled for 1966), and making the division of humanity the product of a bunker culture in a future age of armageddon, after which "By some quirk of fate," as his hero weakly

explained with a voice-over wave of the hand, "the Morlocks had become the masters and the Eloi their servants." Wells's great visionary finale, in which the time traveller is outplayed by the Morlocks and flees to a final age of the world populated only by crustaceans and flapping invertebrates on a lichenous beach under a dying sun, gave way to a more upbeat and Hollywood ending in which the Morlocks are defeated, the heroine survives, and the time traveller returns to join her in a forward-looking future in the world he's helped to save. No great surprise here, given that the one theory of history permitted in Hollywood is the doctrine that One Person Can Make a Difference – precisely the claim that Wells's tale so eloquently set out to deny.

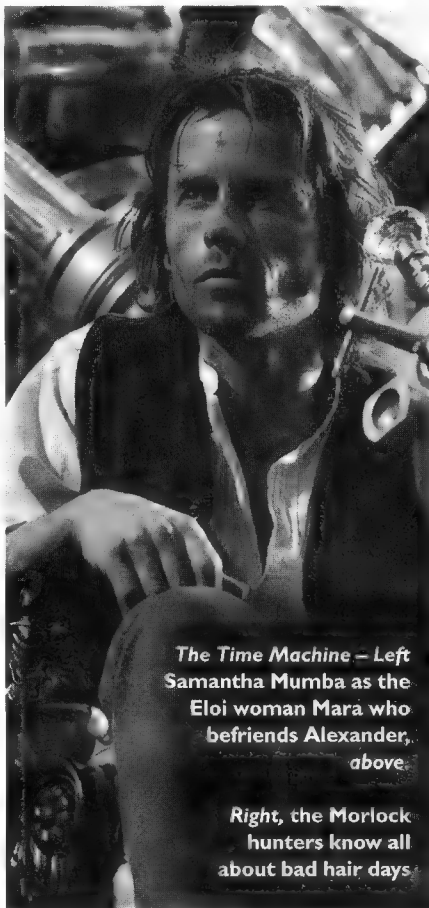
And Logan takes all this a giant step further. In 2002, the very notion that any film hero can be motivated to





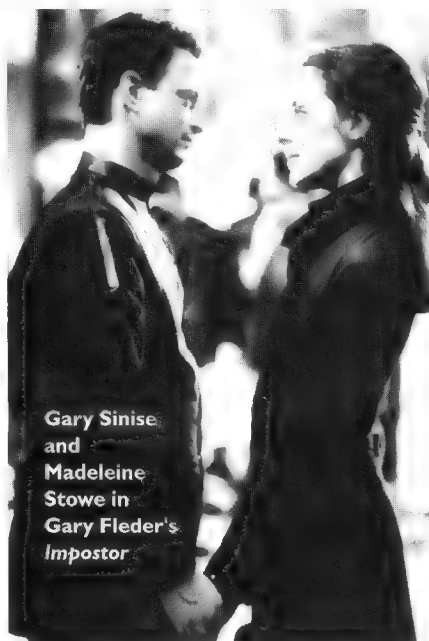
The Time Machine – Left
Samantha Mumba as the
Eloi woman Mara who
befriends Alexander,
above.

Right, the Morlock
hunters know all
about bad hair days.

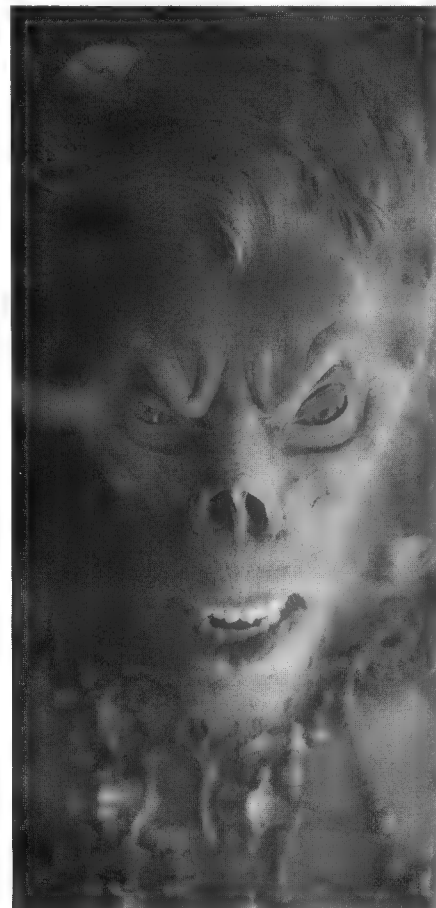


do anything whatever by mere intellectual curiosity is no longer even thinkable; everything has to be *personal*. Getting our man interested in history at all involves the only motive guaranteed to play nationwide, the elimination of death; so our hero has now to lose his fiancée to a mugger (even in 1894 muggers seem to have had free access to handguns) and dedicate the rest of his life to making it never have happened. There's still a throwaway apocalypse in 2037, but nothing as old-hat as WW3; instead, it's the fault of private enterprise nuking the moon for real estate, a plausible future if ever there wasn't. (This does enable some undeniably evocative night shots of the *Riven*-style far-future village under the remains of an ancient shattered moon, but otherwise the design is all rather *Postman*-esque, and haunted by the curse that hovers over all post-apocalypse films with large wicker sets.) As in Duncan, Wells's moral and evolutionary ambivalence over humanity's schism into Eloi and Morlocks is conveniently disambiguated by making the Eloi lipsmackingly attractive and English-speaking, while the 2002 Morlocks are hulking Stan Winston behemoths ruled over by Jeremy Irons. But now it's possible to take out the Morlocks, and remake the future of the world, at a single stroke, thanks to one of those conveniently overcentralized hub

organizations where you just take out the leader and start a fire in the HQ and their whole evil empire quite literally collapses. You'd think after 80,000 years of evolution they'd have learned. This time around, the Traveller never even makes it back to tell his yarn over dinner; but hey, when you have the option of repopulating the future with minor Irish pop goddesses and their kin, who needs the 19th century, whenever that was?



Gary Sinise
and
Madeleine
Stowe in
Gary Fleder's
Impostor



Fifty years up the line, another genre-defining classic finds itself strapped into the saddle of history, in a film that opens with a still more reverential statement of authorship. "*Impostor*," the pre-titles forewarn, "is based on the short story by legendary futurist Philip K. Dick. It was written in 1953." It's unclear whether this datestamp is supposed to impress us with the legendary futurist's uncanny prescience, or just to label the cold-war allegory as an expression of its far-off times. It's certainly not in itself a terribly striking datum, given that Dick actually wrote 33 stories in 1953, about a quarter of his entire short-fiction output, banging gleefully away at the keys night and day while jumped out of his head on amphetamines. Still, there's no disputing that "*Impostor*" is one of the towering landmarks of its author's early career – identified by Dick himself as the first full incarnation of his master plot about whether we're who we think we are. Its one-of-us-is-an-android-bomb plot had emerged a few weeks earlier in "*Second Variety*," but "*Impostor*" added the crucial twist that the hero himself is on the list of suspects – thus triggering the *Everybody Runs* plot so all-purpose useful to larger-budgeted Dick screen ventures that *Impostor* might almost pass for a spoiler.

Now, these early-'50s Dick shorts are clearly a dream to pitch. "OK, one

day at work you get jumped on by secret service and told you're not you but an alien bomb implanted with your memories. So you escape, and go on the run in search of proof that they've made a mistake and you're really you. But supposing you're right and you're not the bomb, *who is?* And *what's the trigger?* It doesn't need Spielberg to come at you across the table with one of these to feel an overpowering urge to greenlight it on the spot. But expanding these killer vignettes to feature length is much more of an art. Even Dick himself often had trouble with follow-through (one of the problems with "Minority Report" in his version); if it's not going to degenerate into a chase movie, you need to keep the paranoia ticking over with a steady stream of twists, rug-pulls and red herrings, while somehow distracting the audience from effortlessly outguessing them all.

Dick's own "Impostor" is short and economical – too much so for film – with just one false ending and one memorably neat, nasty twist. The film keeps these, but piles on a lot of further material: a second level of metaphysical paranoia, fuelled by the hallucinogens with which Gary Sinise's hero is pumped in the first act; a subplot introducing a grimy underclass of non-combatants outside the protection of the urban Dome; a convoluted middle-act detour into an abortive attempt to prove Sinise's humanity by body-scan. In the story, the trigger for the bomb is the utterance of a verbal string; in the movie, it's *supposedly* proximity to the target, but the script is careful to have Special Investigator D'Onofrio asked early on: "Is there a secondary trigger?" – so now there are two ways (at least) for the bad guy to go boom if he's not unmasked in time. From the start, the film version is more generous than its source with clues that seem to confirm that Sinise's character is indeed an alien ringer: flashbacks to something nasty in the woods; impossibly swift assassin reflexes at a couple of points of action crisis; a strange first-act exchange, never really explained, about the forest fire where the Centaurian ship crashed at the site of his picnic with the Mrs ("Good thing you missed the fire," says best mate Tony Shalhoub, to which Sinise enigmatically responds "Who says I missed it?").

But the most difficult challenge with PKD films is that they engage the viewer so actively in the plotting – a dangerous hostage, given that most movie audiences are so much cleverer than most movies. Thus, within minutes of the setup, the audience is looking far ahead down the forking paths: given that there'll have to be at least three twists, what will they be? What other characters can be the bomb?

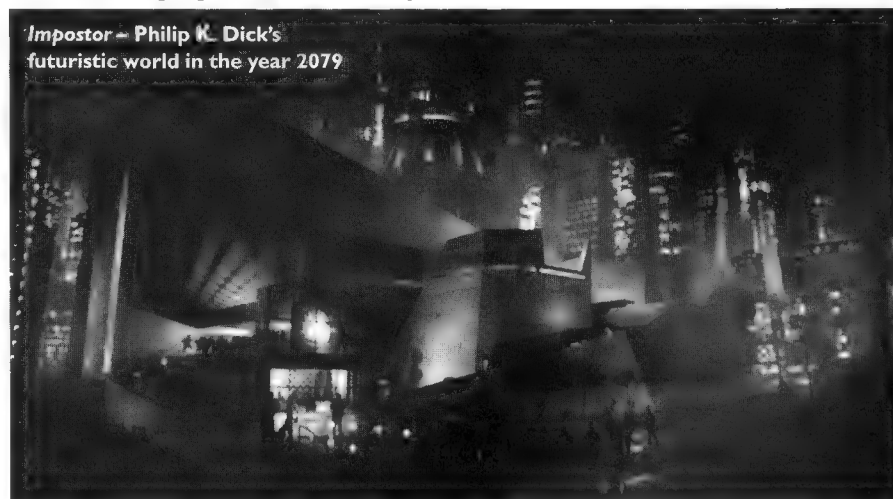


D'Onofrio, Shalhoub, lovely wife Madeleine Stowe for a start; but all these are too easy, so we need a bigger twist. The supposed assassination target is played by Lindsay Crouse, whom you don't cast unless you have something in mind for her; is she what she seems, or something more sinister? And then you start thinking towards more elaborate trapdoor plotting: since the dialogue points out that nobody has ever seen a Centaurian, and our cities are protected against incursion by defensive domes, who's to say that the enemy is as our media say? The expository section openly invites scepticism over the true nature of the war, with Crouse's character sinisterly referred to as "the beloved leader," and Stowe and Sinise already querying the trustworthiness of media reports of the war. So is there in fact a bomb at all, and who's really behind the whole conspiracy? Does the enemy even exist? Is *anything* what it seems? From the moment that Sinise is jacked up with psychoactives, how much, if anything, of what happens afterwards is real?

It would be nice to be able to say that these questions are manipulated to a satisfying end, and that the prodigious plot expansions assemble into a coherent and purposeful whole. Sadly,

the twists at the end are with one exception the least ambitious and longest-predicted of all in the audience's list. The script has been through five credited writers, leaving the narrative and motivation so fragmented that the luckless last link in the chain, the normally-dependable David Twohy, has been unable to pull the pieces intelligibly together. Most of *Impostor* is a dismal mess, and the best that can be said is that its serial incoherences do at least evoke, however unintentionally, some of the jagged dislocation of Dick's '60s novels. There are interesting ideas, and the final redemptive twist is pulled quite neatly out of the bag, but for all their fidelity to names and original plot elements, Twohy and his pre-writers just don't have the same feeling for Dick's vertiginous reality shifts as Dan O'Bannon, who remains the definitive adapter of PKD shorts for the screen (not just in *Total Recall* and *Minority Report*, but most effectively of all in the low-budget adaptation of "Second Variety" as *Screamers*). In an industry greedy for powerful ideas, the lure of the classics is overwhelming; but with great power comes great responsibility, and it can all so easily blow up in your face.

Nick Lowe



The Arthur C. Clarke Award was presented on 18 May at the London Science Museum, with copious free wine before and after. Five of the six nominees (Connie Willis couldn't make it) trembled in the front row of the Imax theatre as administrator Paul Kincaid worked up suspense via such delaying devices as a special presentation to Sir Arthur's brother Fred, for his hero work behind the scenes. Then last year's winner China Miéville – togged up, for the first time in living memory, with a suit and tie – opened the fatal envelope as quickly as he could, and presented the souvenir bookend and £2002 cheque to Gwyneth Jones for her “near future fantasy” *Bold as Love*. Gwyneth later recollected in tranquillity: “The operation was really very painless. Neither fear nor hope possessed me. I didn't have a thought in my head when China stood up, besides well, now we can all clap the winner, stand around nattering for a bit and then go home...” Despite widespread concern that the Imax screen might at any instant light up with a terrifying 70-foot talking head of Sir Arthur, it wasn't used.

THE TOMORROW PEOPLE

Ben Bova's sf novel *The Rock Rats* was illustrated on Amazon.com – for a short glorious period, until the authorities noticed – with a cover scan which subtly modified his name to BEN DOVA.

Richard Cowper (John Murry) might have been amused that there was standing room only at his funeral on 7 May. Rob Holdstock and David Wingrove delivered tributes; Christopher Priest read a moving passage from John's autobiography. Later we recalled his favourite anecdote, of the alarming lady who welcomed him to the first UK Milford conference with a kiss and a cry of what sounded like, “You have the eyes of a prune!” It was Anne McCaffrey. Who thought he looked like one of her characters...

Harlan Ellison, discussing copyright and Internet piracy at Baycon (USA) in May, made the following trenchant debating point to bemused net expert Brad Templeton: “Do not pull funny faces, motherfucker, when I'm talking.”

Brian Stableford reports: “My ten millionth published word will appear before the end of the year – my arithmetic isn't sufficiently exact for me to identify which one it will be – and I realize to my horror that it has taken me 37 years.”

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

J. Michael Straczynski was tickled to learn that his unfavourite UK fan Bryan Cooney (of Wolf 359 convention-running infamy) had posed as a courier to sneak into Bridge Studios, Vancouver, where *Jeremiah* and *Stargate* are filmed, and was twice ejected with extreme prejudice after begging actors to sign photographs. “So outrageous was the situation that, apparently, whatever minor franchise license he had has been revoked by MGM, and by orders of those at *Stargate* if he attempts to slip onto the lot again he will be arrested on sight.” JMS deeply regrets that “all this happened within 100 yards of my office on the lot, and I was completely unaware of it [...] For this I would've set up a lawn chair on the grounds and sold tickets...”

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Awards. *Carnegie Medal* for children's fiction: this year's shortlist of eight includes two fantasies by well-known names, Peter Dickinson's *The Rope-maker* and Terry Pratchett's *The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents*. • *Lambda Awards* for gay/lesbian writing: the 2002 sf and fantasy category was won by Lisa A. Barnett & Melissa Scott, for *Point of Dreams*. • *Sidewise* (alternate history) shortlists ... Long: J. Gregory Keyes, “Age of Unreason” series–*Newton's Cannon*, *A Calculus of Angels*, *Empire of Unreason*, *The Shadous of God*; Allen M. Steele, *Chronospace*; J. N. Stroyar, *The Children's War*. Short: Stephen Baxter & Simon Bradshaw, “First to the Moon”; Ken MacLeod, “The Human Front.”

Zero Hour. From the *Guardian* website, 14 May 2002: “Lembik Opik MP and *Guardian* science editor Tim Rad-

ford discuss the possibility that an incoming asteroid will hit Earth at 2.30pm today.”

Peripatetic. The traditional London sf fan meetings on the first Thursday evening each month are moving again, after problems with the current pub venue in June. Latest updates at www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/Ansible/london.html.

As Others See Us. *The Bookseller* reacted predictably to a genre publicist's grumble about snobbish literary attitudes. “You hear this sort of thing all the time from SF wallahs, who bang on about the Booker Prize and never seem to take the pleasure they should in the fact that they are Not As Other People. In fact I am contemplating a series of riotously funny fantasy novels set entirely in Chipworld, a self-contained universe that hovers permanently just above Terry Pratchett's shoulder.” (17 May)

R.I.P. at BBC. *John Nathan-Turner* (1948-2002), producer responsible for 130 episodes of *Doctor Who* from 1980 to 1989, died on 3 May aged 54. He first joined the show as a floor assistant in 1969. *Bernard Wilkie* (1920-2002), pioneer of TV special effects and co-founder of the BBC Visual Effects Workshop, died on 2 May aged 82. His sf work included 1984 (1954), *Quatermass II* (1955) and its sequel, and *Dr Who* – not to mention *Monty Python* and *The Goodies*.

Dept of SF Predictions. H. G. Wells very nearly foresees that utopian personal transport, the Segway: “A man had come up along the road on a machine like a small two-wheeled two-seater with its wheels in series, bicycle fashion; lighter and neater it was than any earthly automobile and mysteriously able to stand upon its two wheels while standing still.” (*Men Like Gods*, 1923)

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Introspection.* “Impossible to see, the future is,” the small Jedi Master replied, his great orbs still looking inward.” (R. A. Salvatore, *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, 2002) It is suspected that Yoda is here trying to read his own mind. *Dept of Eyeballs in the Sky.* “Marley's great, popping black eyes bounced around the room, looking for any sign of retreat from any of the guests.” (James L. Swanson, *The Stuff That Dreams Are Made Of*, 2001) *Dept of Theology.* “Remember the first commandment? *Thou shalt not kill!*” (Jack Ketchum, *Right to Life*, 2002) *Dept of Morbid Physiology.* “His sweat was cold and clammy now, and even his anus squeezed open and shut.” (Nick Mamatas, *Northern Gothic*, 2001)

The Blue Portal

Eric Brown

Part Two

The story so far...

Summoned to Cranley Grange by the reclusive and eccentric magazine editor Jasper Carnegie during the bitter winter of 1935, Jonathon Langham, a struggling novelist, and Edward Vaughan, a successful author of scientific romances, make the journey from London to the Chilterns. There they find Carnegie in a state of high excitement. "Do you think that out there, or somewhere maybe in the future, there exist races and civilizations of which we with our puny intelligence can but dream?" He recounts how late one night he happened to see an eerie blue light in the air above Hopton Wood. He investigated, only for the light to vanish as he approached. Every night for the next week he returned. Just as he was about to despair, the light occurred again. He heard a high whining sound in the air and seconds later was knocked unconscious by an almighty explosion.

Now eight days after the previous manifestation of the light, the friends make their way to the clearing in the hope of witnessing the strange phenomenon together.

Shortly after midnight, the clearing fills with light. A great blue portal appears, hanging in the air, and within it the three friends behold tall humanoid figures moving back and forth.

Beguiled by this evidence of another world, Jasper Carnegie lunges towards the interface. Langham tries to

stop him. Carnegie argues, "They represent all that is powerful, all that is knowledgeable! If I could only join them!"

But Vaughan manages to halt Carnegie before he steps into the blue light, which then collapses with a great inrushing roar of air and pops out of existence.

One week later Langham and Vaughan return to Cranley Grange, and accompanied by Carnegie and his brother, Charles, a doctor just back from India, venture once more to the clearing.

In the early hours they are rewarded.

Transfixed, the four men watch as the blue light is replaced by a strange, otherworldly scene. In the air they behold the small shape of a flying machine heading towards the portal, passing through and crash-landing among the trees. From it, a small, humanoid manikin emerges. No sooner have Langham and his friends recovered from their shock than two lizard-like beings jump through the portal in pursuit of the flying craft and its pilot.

With weapons firing beams of light, the lizards and the manikin join battle. The manikin defeats his foe, reducing the lizards to ashes, but upon investigation, Langham and his friends find the manikin severely injured. They resolve to aid the strange being, and using its ultralightweight flying machine as a sedan-chair, transport the manikin back to Cranley Grange...

Within an hour of leaving Hopton Wood we were dragging the craft, containing the injured alien, through the French windows and across the carpet. Charles opened up the cockpit and peered inside. "He appears to be unconscious," he reported. "Will someone help me ease him from the craft and onto the chesterfield?"

I took the creature's shoulders, his thick flesh clammy and cold to my touch, and when Charles had a grip on its legs we carefully lifted the manikin from the vessel and onto the chesterfield.

Seen in the light of the open fire, its true difference to a human being was apparent. It was perhaps the height of a ten year old child, but thick of torso and limb; its flesh reminded me in hue of nothing so much as an unwashed potato.

I found the fact that it was unconscious somewhat reassuring. Its face was as ugly as the rest of its body, with no nose but a hideous horizontal slit where a nose should be, and beneath this a much longer slit which I took to be its mouth. Its eyes were not lidless, as I had formerly supposed, but covered with a thin, flickering membrane. I gained the impression that, conscious, the being would have presented an even more hideous aspect.

Charles began a quick inspection of the creature's injuries, then stood. "We'll need a plentiful supply of boiling water, Jasper. Jonathon, can you get me a clean sheet or two? Vaughan, you'll find my medical bag in my room – it should provide me with the basics I need to treat our patient." I had never seen Charles less diffident than now, as he took on the authority of his profession and gave us our orders.

Five minutes later, his bidding done, we gathered again in the library and convened around the figure of the alien.

Charles injected the manikin with a small dose of morphine, then with swabs of alcohol cleaned the wound in its torso as best as he was able. "The danger of performing the wrong procedure upon an alien physiology is always present," he said. "I can but treat the creature as I would a human, and hope for the best."

He cut away flaps and shards of dead flesh from around the wound, so as to counter infection, then set about investigating the broken bones therein. I saw enough to assure me that the manikin's anatomy in no way resembled a human's: instead of ribs, it seemed to have broad plates of bone about its chest, like the slats of a barrel.

At last, unable to watch any longer for fear of emptying my stomach of its last meal, I made myself absent and poured a round of brandies for my friends.

The tear-drop craft caught my attention. I walked around the vehicle, marvelling that but hours ago it had been sailing through the skies of some far-distant, different world. Quite how it might power itself was a mystery: I could see no propulsion unit or engine inside or out. Inspecting the fuselage, I saw before the pilot's sling a smooth dashboard, for want of a better expression, marked with alien hieroglyphs.

Then my eye fell upon the devices and instruments I had seen upon my first inspection in Hopton Wood. They were arranged haphazardly to the front and rear of the sling, as if thrown in higgledy-piggledy at the last second before

departure. I reached in and pulled out these oddments.

The first was what appeared to be a blue ovoid, the size of an ostrich's egg, and very lightweight. As to its purpose, I had no idea, other than it might be some kind of ornament. Next I produced a circular plinth about the size of a halved keg; this was girdled with silver spars, upon which was yet another array of spidery hieroglyphs. I reached in again, like a child at a lucky-dip stall, and pulled out a circular stone as black as obsidian attached to a length of shiny material like ribbon. The last object from the fuselage was a silver container, not unlike a bread box, but with an opening at its front and a series of marked lines within that formed a grid.

I ranked these gee-gaws before the craft and studied them again one by one, but at the end of the process was no wiser as to the utility of the objects.

I finished my brandy and poured another round. Charles was working industriously upon the manikin. I saw a needle of thread being pressed into service, and a scalpel flash once or twice. For all its ugliness, I felt a sudden compassion for the stunted creature, in such a state of grievous injury and so far from home.

At last Charles stood back and dashed off his brandy. The creature lay upon its back, its body enwrapped in bandages. Naked but for tight undershorts and bulbous boots, it appeared as comical as it did pathetic.

"Well," Jasper enquired. "Do you think it'll pull through?"

Charles drew an armchair to the fire and collapsed into it. "Impossible to tell, quite frankly. If it were human, then I would put its chances at no greater than fifty-fifty. But who knows the tenacity and strength of creatures such as these? I've done the best I could with the resources available to me. We can but hope that infection doesn't set in."

"Perhaps," Jasper suggested, "if we could get it to hospital...?"

Charles shook his head. "There's not a hospital within 20 miles that could do more than this, and the trauma of transportation might see him off."

"And besides," Vaughan said, "how we might explain a creature of such singular aspect?"

I looked at him. "Do you think it wise to keep what happened to ourselves?"

Vaughan glanced around the group. "What do people think? I am of the opinion that to inform others of our discovery would be a grave mistake."

Jasper nodded. "I agree. The leaders of men befoul whatever they touch."

Charles said, "But if these beings – either those allied to our friend here, or the reptilian characters – prove to harbour hostile intentions, then a recourse to the authorities might be the only option." He was plucking at his Adam's apple again, nervous.

I nodded. "We cannot entirely veto the option," I said.

"But until such time as we learn the intentions of the creatures one way or the other," Vaughan responded, "then I think we should say nothing to anyone." He looked around the group. "Agreed?"

One by one we gave assent, then fell silent as we regarded the patient.

Jasper slipped from the room, and I was heartened to

see him return five minutes later bearing a tray of bread and cheese, a side of beef and a jar of pickled onions. At the sight of the food, I realized how famished I was.

We pulled a sofa to the fire and fell to eating as our alien guest slept beside us, and it came to me what a strange tableau we would have presented to any prying eyes: four men partaking ravenously of bread and meat, a gargoyle asleep beside them on a chesterfield and, at the back of the room, a sleek, futuristic craft upon the carpet in a puddle of melted snow.

I stopped eating, a pickled onion halted before my mouth, and stared across at Vaughan. A thought had occurred to me. "What if," I said, "the reptile creatures decide to pursue our friend further? After all, he did account for two of their kind."

Jasper looked up from his brandy. "It's an eventuality we cannot discount."

"We must assume that they can open the portal at will," I said. "in that case we might be in danger."

Vaughan was shaking his head. "There are too many imponderables in the equation to be sure of anything," he said. "For all we know the feud between the homunculus and the reptiles might have been a local affair, about which the operators of the portal care nothing. We just cannot be sure."

"Perhaps," I said, "the manikin destroyed the portal when he shot at it, rendering it useless?"

Vaughan nodded. "A possibility," he said.

But Jasper was on his feet. "To be on the safe side, gentlemen, I think we had better arm ourselves. If the portal was not destroyed, and the reptiles come hunting..." And so saying he dashed from the room and returned minutes later bearing four pistols and ammunition.

He distributed them amongst us, ignoring my protests that I'd never fired a gun in my life.

"And little good these pea-shooters would be against the reptile's light-beam weapons," Vaughan said good-naturedly.

"Better these than our bare fists," Jasper declared.

He opened another bottle of brandy, and we settled in for a night of conversation while beside us our alien patient slept in silence.

Towards dawn I could stay awake no longer, and slipped into a doze. By some miracle, considering the events of the night, I did not dream. It was midday when I awoke, stretched out on a settee; Vaughan was dozing in a nearby armchair, his leonine mane somewhat dishevelled. Of Jasper there was no sign; Charles, for his part, was attending to the manikin's injuries.

He looked up when he saw that I was awake. "Jonathon, if you could lend a hand for a minute."

I assisted him on the process of cutting away the old dressing and discarding it on the fire. As Charles peeled away the last of the lint from the wound, I saw his expression change to one of incredulity.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Look," he said, gesturing at the wound with his tweezers. "I've never known such a rapid process of healing."

Indeed, where before the wound had been red raw and

bloody, now a great deal of it was scabbed over. The broken bones, or platelets, were entirely covered with what looked like a new growth of skin.

Vaughan awoke and joined us, peering down at the manikin as Charles detailed the specifics of the recovery. "In a human, this sort of progress might be expected after a week or more of intensive care. I do believe that the bony plates around his chest have knitted. This is most remarkable."

He re-dressed the wound and the manikin slept on with hardly a murmur.

A little later, Jasper appeared with a trolley bearing the makings of a fine breakfast, bacon and devilled kidneys, scrambled eggs and fresh brown bread.

"Cook thinks I've taken leave of my senses," he reported. "She usually serves the meals, but I insisted. I've given her a few days off, told her that we're going away for the week." He gazed at the injured creature on the chesterfield and shook his head. "Heavens knows how she might react if she clapped eyes on our friend here."

Over breakfast we discussed what might become of the manikin, should he survive his injuries.

"In that eventuality," Charles said, "and at his present rate of progress, I see no reason why he might not fully recover. Then we might have to inform the authorities of our discovery."

Vaughan frowned. "The poor devil will become a circus freak," he said. "Either that, or the government will impound him and subject him to a series of medical experiments."

"Perhaps," Jasper said, "if he does pull through, then we should attempt to ascertain how he desires to proceed?"

I considered the events of the night before. "It is possible," I said at last, "that he intended expressly to come here. I mean, the portal was opened upon our world, and the manikin in his carriage made a bee-line for the interface. Perhaps he has an errand here?"

"An errand," Jasper said, "that the reptiles were intent on him not achieving."

We contemplated that rousing possibility for a while.

Our silence was interrupted by a sound from the manikin himself. He groaned, then gave vent to a soft, sibilant hiss.

We gathered around the chesterfield and watched as he regained consciousness. His membranous eye-lids fluttered open to reveal large, protuberant eyes: they were jet black, without any white at all, but with a vertical amber slit at the centre of each. His gaze was disconcerting, to say the least – all the more so for the fact that he did not once blink as he turned his head slowly on the cushion to regard us one by one.

His lipless slot of a mouth opened minimally. "*Vah-rah, ne-sah... Kar na.*" The words came with an obvious effort, and with long seconds between each sibilant pronouncement.

He fell silent, his mouth slot turning down as if in pain. Charles reached out tentatively, took the creature's stubby fingers in his, and squeezed.

The manikin responded. As we stared, we saw his plump, dun digits tighten around Charles' hand. "We're

doing all we can for you, old chap," he said. "Our medical methods might be primitive by your own standards, but you seem to possess a remarkable constitution that more than makes up for the lack."

The manikin lifted its free hand and pointed, feebly. I followed the direction of its trembling finger. "The craft," I said.

His hand fell back to the chesterfield, as if the effort of pointing had exhausted him.

"I wonder if he wants to be returned to his vessel?" Vaughan said. He moved into the line of the manikin's sight, and pointed first to the manikin himself, and then to the craft. He repeated the signal, then mimed carrying the manikin over to the craft and laying him in the sling.

Vaughan returned and knelt beside the chesterfield. The manikin regarded him. "*Tah*," it said. Once again it lifted a finger and pointed across the room.

A thought occurred to me. "Perhaps it doesn't mean the craft," I said, "but the devices I took from it last night."

I hurried across the room and knelt beside the ranked objects. I pointed to each one in turn, giving the manikin time to respond.

I indicated first the blue egg, to which the manikin said, "*Tah*." Negative.

I pointed to the plinth-like object and received the same response.

Next I held up the obsidian medal on the silver thong. "*Vee!*" said the manikin, with emphasis. "*Vee, vee!*"

"It appears that our friend desires this, for some reason," I said, returning to the chesterfield with the medallion.

I passed it to the manikin. With anticipation, we looked on as the being attempted to slip the medallion around its neck. It gave up, its feeble strength unequal to the task.

Charles leaned forward and took the medallion; he parted the silver thong and looped it over the manikin's bulbous head, arranging the obsidian disc on the creature's chest.

As we watched, wondering what might happen next, the manikin reached up and touched the disc.

The obsidian medallion glowed suddenly a deep, lustrous crimson hue, for all the world like a hot coal.

And then the manikin spoke, its sibilant words coming with obvious difficulty as it fought against the pain. "*Shanda rahn, ve rah-na. Cah na sa-tah.*"

We looked at each other and shook our heads. Charles said, "I'm sorry, we cannot understand –"

He stopped, then, for a sound had issued from the glowing medallion around the manikin's neck. We each of us stood back in amazement as a voice came from the direction of the disc.

"Feel... no... alarm. Peaceful... I." The words came one by one, with much static in between, but perfectly comprehensible.

"A translation device!" Vaughan cried. "Good God, what next!"

More words came from the device. "Thank... you... I..." There was more static, and then, "Your... help... need."

Vaughan looked at us. "I wonder if the device can translate our words?" He knelt beside the chesterfield

and leaning forward spoke into the medallion. "Who are you? From where do you come?"

Seconds later the disc translated, "*Jhen-nu... mah... rahntan... Kas... Dahn... Kur... thay.*"

The manikin's eyes closed briefly, the membranes falling and flickering, as if the effort of communication was causing his pain.

Slowly, he spoke. "*Jheran tah kahr Kathan...*" he began, and continued for a minute, before exhaustion claimed him and he fell silent.

The medallion translated, and I will report the essence of his communiqué without the interruptions and static.

"I am Kathan, from the fourth quadrant of the spiral arm, a planet my people call Jheluum."

I stared at Jasper, who was mopping his balding head and staring in wonder at our incapacitated guest. "The stars..." he murmured to himself. Charles was pacing back and forth before the fire, his fingers at his Adam's apple.

Of course, the possibility that the manikin might have hailed from beyond the precincts of planet Earth had always been one explanation, but to have corroboration of the possibility from the lips of the traveller himself – or rather from his fantastical translation device – set me to contemplating the astounding consequences of the fact that we were not alone in the universe.

A minute later, Kathan opened his eyes again and regarded us. Vaughan nodded that we had understood. He said into the medallion, "You came from the stars to our planet, but for what reason?"

He stopped to allow the device to translate his question, and a minute later it spoke in Kathan's language.

The manikin looked at us as he took in Vaughan's question. His thin eye-lids fluttered, a sure sign that he was failing. Feebly he began, "*Kirnah, sah jahr. Tak lai pawhn na...*"

We waited, impatiently, for the device to render the translation.

A minute later it came. "Short explanation: I was fleeing evil authorities. I had to escape. My people effected my jump from the fourth quadrant. I came here because it was distant, and in time I will move on again."

My head whirled with a hundred questions. There was so much I wished to know about the universe beyond our planet, and about Kathan's flight in particular. Why was he fleeing the evil authorities? What had he done to provoke their wrath? Who were his people? Were the evil authorities the reptilian creatures we had seen in the clearing?

Kathan spoke again, but this time each word came with an even greater effort, and his eye-lids fluttered. His lipless mouth was drawn into a deep bow of what I took to be pain.

In due course the medallion translated, "Where am I? Can you give me the precise star-co-ordinates of your planet? My people could not open the jump gate with any accuracy."

Vaughan licked his lips and spoke into the device. "We do not know the star-co-ordinates of our planet," he said. "We are a young race, who have yet to venture into space. We inhabit a small Class G star in a galaxy we call the Milky Way, in one of its spiral arms..." He smiled, sadly. "But of course this will mean nothing to you."

Kathan tried to speak, when he had heard the translation, but the effort was beyond him. He attempted to raise his hand again, to point towards his craft, but never completed the gesture. His hand fell and his eyes closed finally, and his breathing became even.

Charles examined his alien charge. "We've tired him out," he said. "The fact that he was even conscious while in such a condition..." He shook his head. "Oh, the wonders that are out there..."

For the rest of the afternoon we sat while Kathan slipped in and out of consciousness. Jasper opened a bottle of claret and stoked the fire. Outside, a new fall of snow was obliterating the tracks we had scored down the hillside while transporting Kathan to safety.

"We have so much to ask Kathan when he is able to respond," Vaughan said. "I would like to know more of the political situation of the galaxy out there, and where Kathan stands, and the reptiles... And, my God, consider all the technological innovations of which we know nothing!"

"Think of all the wondrous worlds out there!" Jasper cried, and I saw tears filming his eyes as he contemplated the thought.

"The main thing we need to know," Charles said, "just as soon as Kathan is fit enough to speak again, and not before, is what are his intentions. He said he wished to move on again from here, but will this entail another trip through... what did he call it?... the jump gate?"

I shook my head. "Perhaps his carriage will take him the rest of the way through space?" I surmised.

Vaughan was chuckling quietly to himself. "The fourth quadrant of the galaxy!" he said. "And we thought that he might have hailed from Mars! How parochial can you get!"

Kathan was still unconscious an hour later, and Charles dozing in an armchair. While Jasper retired to the kitchen to prepare a meal, taking Vaughan with him, I took a long bath and changed into fresh clothing. By the time I returned to the library, Jasper, Charles and Vaughan were standing with their backs to the hearth like a scene from a gentleman's club, wine glasses in hand.

A little later we gathered around the chesterfield while Charles removed the dressing from Kathan's wound.

He shook his head in wonder. "I've never quite seen the like," he murmured.

The burn was almost wholly scabbed over now, and the flesh on the perimeter of the wound seemed almost like new.

Charles applied new dressings, and we were about to begin dinner when Kathan's membranous eye-lids fluttered open and his jet eyes regarded us.

We gathered around again, and Vaughan knelt before the recumbent alien. "If you are up to it, we have more questions."

He waited for the medallion to translate his inquiry, then Kathan spoke. A minute later the medallion relayed his words.

"I am much improved. I will do my best to answer your questions."

Vaughan looked at us. I said, "We need to know if we

are safe, or if the reptiles might come through the jump-gate in search of him."

He bent and relayed the question. A minute later the obsidian medallion translated Kathan's reply, "I think we are safe. My people are doing all they can to scramble my trail."

"Did you destroy the portal when you fired upon it?" I asked.

The reply came, "I doubt it – merely severed the immediate connection."

Vaughan said, "Who are the reptiles, and why were you fleeing them?"

We waited, watching Kathan's expressionless face as he replied. The medallion spoke, "The reptiles, as you call them, are known as the Vark. They are the dominant species in the galaxy. They are an evil, rapacious race, and rule without mercy. We oppose their regime, and will fight to the death to bring about its downfall. Rest assured, we are fighting for the freedom of the oppressed."

"How many races are abroad in the galaxy?" Vaughan asked. "And how many planets are habitable?"

Presently the reply came. "There are more than 50 star-faring races," Kathan told us, "and over 200 known planet-bound civilizations who have yet to join the council."

I stared at my friends. "More than 200 different species of intelligent beings," I said. I imagined the galaxy teeming with all manner of life, all types of bizarre and quixotic civilizations.

Vaughan said to the glowing medallion, "And we humans, I take it, are one of the 200 races you call planet-bound?"

Kathan, having heard the question, gestured with his right hand – a quick flutter that conveyed no meaning to us. A minute later the medallion spoke. "That is so. You will be listed as Sentient-Technological Grade III."

"And what exactly does that mean?" Vaughan asked.

"It means," the translator said after a while, "that you are not sufficiently developed, culturally, to be allowed on to the council, although it is but a matter of time before you are technologically advanced enough for contact to be established."

Kathan's eye-lids fluttered, and his breathing grew ragged. "He is tiring," Charles said. "Perhaps he has answered enough."

"One more question," Vaughan said, and turned to the alien being. "Would it be advisable for our authorities, our governments, to know of the galactic situation?"

Kathan heard the question and attempted to sit up; he appeared distressed. His words came in gasps, and in due course the medallion relayed his reply.

"It would be ill-advised for your leaders to know! Such knowledge would only cause unrest, which would start hostilities among your people and set back the course of your progress. The council will contact you in the fullness of time, when you are deemed sufficiently ready. Until then, it must be your secret."

Charles knelt beside the alien. "Would you like water, a little food?"

The medallion duly replied. "Water only..."

Charles fetched a glass of water and held it to Kathan's

hyphen-like mouth. The alien drank thirstily, and Charles fetched a second glass. After finishing this one, Kathan lay back on the cushions, as if the effort had exhausted him, and his eye-lids fluttered shut.

We took the opportunity to consume the stew that Jasper and Vaughan had made, a simple but satisfying broth of beef and vegetables.

We had almost finished the meal when a cry from the chesterfield brought us to our feet.

"Vee kadrah-kah... shanath ay rahk!" Kathan exclaimed, and we gathered around, anxious for the medallion to do its work. Kathan seemed agitated; his eye-lids were flickering rapidly, his hands trembling. I wondered if the apparent healthy state of his wound belied some more fundamental internal injury, which Charles had been unable to repair.

Then the medallion set my mind at ease on that score. "Please, come. Bring the shanath to me!"

Jasper knelt and took the manikin's hand. "What is the shanath?" he asked. "Can you point?"

The medallion translated. Feebly, Kathan lifted a stubby hand and pointed a finger towards the devices ranged before the star-carriage. I hurried over to them and indicated the blue egg.

"Tah!" Kathan cried. Negative.

I pointed next to the circular plinth-like implement, and Kathan dropped his hand. *"Vee,"* he said. I carried the device across to the chesterfield as my friends looked on, as intrigued as I.

Kathan sat up very slowly, taking considerable care not to cause himself undue pain. Charles rushed forward and packed cushions behind his back. Soon the manikin was sitting upright and staring at the shanath.

He spoke, and his medallion translated: "Please check the shanath for damage."

I inspected the plinth, lifting it and turning it this way and that, not at all sure what I was looking for.

Kathan pointed *"Tah!"* he said. "No!"

The rim of the circular device had been dented, no doubt during the star-carriage's crash-landing. A number of the hieroglyphs were buckled and hard to make out.

Kathan spoke again and we had to wait, agonizingly, for the translation. "The damage might affect its efficacy," he said. "If so, then all is lost."

"What is it? I asked. "What does it do?"

In due course the medallion relayed his reply. "It annihilates space and time," he said

I stared at him, alarmed. Vaughan stepped forward. "It is dangerous?" he asked.

"Not at all," came Kathan's eventual answer. He pointed. "Please, place it over there, where there is space."

I moved the shanath from where it stood on the rug before the fire and positioned it, as instructed, in the middle of the room.

I looked at Kathan expectantly. "Now what?" I said.

He spoke, and his medallion translated. "Touch the green light upon the upper surface of the shanath, and then stand well back."

Cautiously I approached the device, reached out and touched the green light, and then ducked away like some-

one lighting a firework.

I rejoined my friends before the fire, and waited. Nothing happened; evidently, this firework was a dud.

Then, just as I was about to quiz Kathan, a blue light sprang from the surface of the shanath with a great crack and fizz of electricity. The whole room was filled with a static charge, and I stared at my friends with a mixture of alarm and amusement. Their hair was standing on end, as was mine. The only person in the room saved this indignity was Kathan, who possessed no hair.

I looked back at the shanath and saw that a tall blue oval – identical in everything but size to the trans-dimensional interface we had witnessed in the clearing – now hung above the plinth. It coruscated with dazzling brilliance, and caused us to cover our eyes. Unlike its larger counterpart, however, this one generated only a modicum of heat.

"A miniature jump gate," Vaughan exclaimed.

Kathan spoke; the medallion glowed. "I have presumed upon your hospitality long enough. It is time I was leaving you."

"You're going?" Jasper cried. "But you said that the Vark were unlikely to follow you. Surely you could stay until you are sufficiently healed? You will only do yourself untold damage if you take flight now. Please, remain here as our guest for a day or two."

Charles said, "It would be wise if you rested a little longer."

Kathan looked at each one of us, his gaze lingering. "I must be away from here. I have business to conduct. Again, I thank you."

Vaughan said, "One thing. Why did you not use this jump gate from the fourth quadrant instead of going through the larger portal and have the Vark follow you?"

At length Kathan replied, and the medallion translated. "This gate jumps only small distances – tens of light years at a time. The larger, industrial gate can jump thousands of light years. Of course, it was a risk using the larger gate – but I wanted to jump into a sector of the galaxy where the Vark did not hold sway."

"And now?" I asked, marvelling that ten light years should be termed a "small distance." "Where are you going now?"

"Now, I intend to make a random jump to the nearest civilized, star-faring planet, and proceed like this to the world of Valandia. There I hope to rendezvous with fellow opponents of the Vark, and plan our next move."

Vaughan said, "We wish you good luck, and a safe journey."

Kathan pointed to the shanath. "There are a series of symbols about the base. If you would press them in a certain sequence..."

Jasper stepped forward. "Allow me." He approached the blue light cautiously, and then knelt at the base of the device. He regarded the hieroglyphs and turned to Kathan. "Precisely which ones?" he asked.

"Tuh!" Kathan said, which the medallion translated as, "Damn!"

"Do you have a writing implement?" he went on.

Jasper produced a pen from his breast pocket, along with a sheet of paper. He carried them over to the

chesterfield and sat down beside the alien.

Kathan took the pen awkwardly, evidently unused to such a primitive implement. He rested the paper upon his lap and proceeded to draw, with painstaking care, a series of 20 complex symbols.

He spoke, and presently we heard, "This is the code that commands the jump gate to locate the most suitable inhabited planet in the locality."

He passed the code to Jasper, who took the sheet of quarto with reverence and paced over to the shanath.

He knelt, studied the symbols on the base of the plinth for a time, and then proceeded to tap the code into the command console.

Instantly the blue light rippled and seconds later a magical scene appeared from within the oval portal. We approached and stared in wonder. The oval framed a scene of weird alien beauty, at once familiar and at the same time unlike anything I had ever seen before. A plane of what might have been grass stretched away from the jump gate, but it was grass the colour of blood, and dotted about the plane were what I took to be trees, but silver trees with branches that more resembled the blades of knives. In the distance, on the far horizon, I made out what might have been a city: a series of diaphanous constructions like domiciles blown from glass, backed by a range of towering purple mountains.

But as we watched, the scene flickered, the effect very much like a reflection seen in water, shimmering and breaking up. One second the alien panorama seemed as solid as the view through the French windows, and the next it was shattered into rippled fragments. Then it vanished altogether, to be replaced by the blue field.

It came again, and then disappeared, phasing in and out of visibility on a regular cycle. "I cannot risk jumping with the gate in this state of disequilibrium," Kathan said. "I might end up pitched into the hostile vacuum of interstellar space."

"Can you do anything to stabilize the image?" Vaughan asked, for all the world as if the image in question was merely that upon a contemporary television set.

"I am no technician," Kathan replied. "I can only wait, and hope that it stabilizes long enough to allow me to jump. In the meantime, I must prepare myself."

"What do you need?" Jasper asked. "Your carriage?"

"It can go with me," he said. "It will take me to yonder city."

"And the other implements?" I said, indicating the blue egg and the thing that reminded me of a bread bin.

Kathan turned his sable eyes towards these devices, then looked at me. "You may keep these," he said. "Perhaps, in time, they will serve a purpose."

"And what about the shanath itself," Vaughan said. "How will you continue your spatial jumps if the base remains here?"

I rather think that Kathan might have smiled at our technological *naïveté*, had he been capable of such a gesture. At last the medallion translated his reply. "The shanath duplicates its working end at its destination," he said. "If, that is, it works at all."

We stared at the flickering portal, alternately showing

the image of the bizarre alien panorama, and then the blank blue field.

Kathan gestured with a flung arm. "If you could manoeuvre my car towards the gate," he said.

I lifted the carriage, amazed again at how light it was, and carried it over to the portal.

"The image comes in cycles," Kathan observed. "Note, there is a period of ten seconds in which the image of the destination planet is stable, then ten seconds of disturbance, and almost the same again when the transmission is lost and all that is seen is the blue generation field."

I nodded. "What of it?"

"I think," he replied at length, "that during the ten seconds of visual stability, it will be safe to effect the jump."

"But it would be madness to take the risk!" Vaughan said.

"I do not intend to risk anything," said the alien, "least of all my life." He looked at me. "If you could lift the car and insert it through the jump gate at the next period of equilibrium," he said, "then we shall see if my theory is proven."

With Vaughan I lifted the star-carriage and approached the portal. We held it at its rear end, as if we were attempting to throw lumber upon a bonfire.

The alien scene broke up, rippled, and then vanished, to be replaced by the sapphire generation field. I counted ten seconds, and then the image of the alien vista materialized and solidified. "After three," I said. "One, two, three, now!"

We launched the car through the jump gate. There was a momentary ripple in the image as the vehicle passed through, and then we saw it skid across the blood-red grass and career to a halt not five yards distant.

"*Kah rah!*" Kathan said, and the medallion duly relayed, "It worked!"

He leaned forward, eyeing each one of us in turn. "Gentlemen," he said. "I have only my thanks to offer you. I will now say farewell."

Vaughan said, "You have given us more than your thanks, my friend. You have granted us knowledge unique and marvellous, for which we will be eternally grateful." He stepped forward and took the alien's hand, followed by Charles who did the same, and then I.

There was something at once comical and touching about the farewell scene, as we four gentlemen approached the dwarfish, semi-naked alien perched primly upon the chesterfield and soberly pumped his hand in a gesture to which he was obviously unaccustomed.

At length we stepped back. I thought that Kathan would attempt to stand upright, but he thought better of it.

"Perhaps," he said, "one of you gentlemen might...?"

Jasper darted forward, and his alacrity to assist the alien should have alerted me as to his motivations, but I thought nothing of it at the time.

He eased his arms beneath Kathan's childlike body and lifted him gently from the chesterfield. Slowly Jasper, holding his burden like a prize, stepped towards the jump gate. As he passed me, I saw something, a light in his eyes as he stared at the scene in the portal, and again I should have guessed his intentions.

If I had stopped him at that moment, then the destinies of all four of us would have been altered forever and, who knows, for the worse?

Jasper paused before the plinth. The gate showed the sapphire generation field; in a matter of seconds, the alien world would appear again. Jasper turned around and looked at each of us, and his gaze lingered on his brother, before he turned again and stared intently at the portal. Only then did the import of his farewell gaze hit me, and I realized what he intended.

I leaped forward, but too late. As soon as the portal cycled around again to the beautiful image of the alien world, Jasper Carnegie, holding Kathan in his arms, stepped from planet Earth and became the very first human being to set foot upon alien soil.

We cried out as one and approached the jump gate.

Carnegie, carrying Kathan, was striding through the red grass towards the star-carriage. As we watched, aghast, he lowered the alien into the sling, turned and raised his hand in farewell.

At that second the image shimmered, rippled, and then was lost, and Charles cried aloud with despair.

"All is not lost," I said. "The image will appear again."

"And then what?" Charles exclaimed.

I did not reply, but I knew what I would do when the portal opened again on to the strange alien world.

We stared at the blue generation field, and this time it seemed to remain longer than any ten seconds. Then, as we were about to despair, it cleared – and we saw before us the vale of blood-red grass and the twisted blade trees. In the foreground was Jasper, standing beside the star-carriage and staring through the portal at us.

I lost no time, and jumped.

I have often thought about my actions then, the foolhardiness of what I did. In retrospect I can see what a risk I took, how momentous were my actions: in one bound I leaped through light years of space, I left one planet and landed upon the surface of another – but at the time, of course, it was merely as if I were jumping from one room and into another.

I felt a quick heat pass through my body as I made the transfer, and then I landed in the grass and rolled. I was aware of two things almost at once: the incredible, raging heat of this planet – a massive red sun hung low in the sky to my right – and the increased gravity. It seemed, as I rose to my feet and gained my bearings, that the hands of a strongman were pressing down upon my shoulders.

I staggered forward, to where Jasper was staring at me in disbelief.

"Jasper!" I cried. "You must come back! You cannot leave everything!"

"I have nothing on Earth to keep me," he replied. "All my life I have craved adventure, and now I have the opportunity to fulfil that craving."

"But you don't belong out here," I protested. "Your home is on Earth."

"My home," he replied calmly, "is where I choose to make it." He looked past me, and stared. He pointed. "Look!"

I whirled around.

The jump gate hung in the air of the alien world, and the image within the oval frame of the portal shimmered as I stared. I could make out a familiar scene: the cosy environs

of Jasper Carnegie's library, the ranked books and the glowing fire, and in the foreground, peering through the portal, the terrified faces of Vaughan and Charles, eddying like reflections upon a disturbed mill pond.

Then the image disappeared, to be replaced by the inhuman blue of the generation field. I cried out, and fear gripped my entrails.

I counted out the seconds. Each one seemed like an eternity. I turned again to Jasper. "Can nothing I say persuade you?" I said. "Think of your brother, your friends on Earth."

"I cannot forego this opportunity," Jasper replied. "And anyway, there is always the chance that I might return, some day."

I turned again to the portal. The blue field shimmered, and then the solid image of the earthly library established itself – but for only two or three seconds at the most, before the image shivered again.

I heard Vaughan's despairing cry, as if from a million miles away, "The image is breaking up, man! Its period of stability becoming ever shorter! You must jump next time or forever be –"

And his words were snatched away as the blue field replaced the scene of the library.

I stepped up to the jump gate, positioning myself upon its very threshold, the increased gravity of this world making my every step a labour. The blue field seemed to last for ever. I counted ten seconds, and a further ten, and I began to despair that I would ever return home.

Then, just as I had begun to give up all hope, the image of the library established itself, briefly, and I wasted not one second in diving through and into the arms of Vaughan and Charles Carnegie.

I whirled around in time to see Jasper lift a hand. Then the image rippled and turned to blue.

I was sweating, and my heart was racing fit to burst as I held Vaughan to me and looked around the wonderful sanctuary of the library.

For the next five minutes we watched as the periods of equilibrium became less and less; soon, the alien world appeared for a second only – brief blips between long stretches where the field showed only blue. We saw the star-carriage take off, bearing Kathan and Carnegie, and move towards the distant city. Then the image vanished altogether, and the connection between the worlds was no more.

Charles cried out loud and slumped into an armchair.

"Don't despair!" I said, and looked frantically around the room.

"What?" Vaughan asked.

"The paper on which Jasper noted down the hieroglyphic sequence," I said. "If we can find it and re-program the device –"

I stopped and stared at Vaughan, for he was shaking his head.

"I saw Jasper stuff the paper into his pocket," he said.

I approached the shanath, knelt and regarded the symbols upon its base. I looked up. "It cannot do any harm to try a random sequence," I said.

"You could try," Vaughan said. "But I doubt it might do much good, either. The chances of happening upon the right sequence must be astronomical." He stopped and

grimaced as he realized his awful pun.

I knew that he was right, but nevertheless stabbed at 20 symbols in quick succession and stood back. Nothing happened, not even so much as a flicker in the blue field.

I tried again, to no avail, and yet a third time. As I stood back after this attempt, the blue field extinguished itself suddenly, and the room was once again illuminated by just the firelight and a reading lamp in the corner. I touched the green light upon the surface of the shanath, which had earlier activated the blue field, but this time nothing happened.

I stared at my friends, bereft.

Vaughan poured three stiff measures of brandy, and we drank in silence and gazed into the flames of the fire.

At last I roused myself to say, "When I spoke to him out there, he said that more than anything he wanted to remain." I paused, then continued. "Also, Charles, he said that one day he might return."

He stared at me. He looked to have suddenly aged ten years; his thin face was even leaner, his eyes sunken. "Did it really happen?" he said, more to himself. "Is my brother really out there?" He gestured in the vague direction of the heavens.

Vaughan shook his head in silent wonder. "He got his wish. He is among the stars. Who knows what great adventure he has embarked upon?"

We fell silent, each occupied with his own tumultuous thoughts.

Only then did it come to me that, however briefly, I too had stepped upon an alien world. Somewhere out there, beneath the light of another sun, light years away from Earth, I had breathed the atmosphere of another planet. I would never again be able to look up into the night sky without experiencing a sense of wonder and disbelief.

We remained in the library until the early hours and only then, with a sense of giving up, did we retire to our respective rooms. The following day we spent in silent vigil; again I attempted to activate the shanath, and prodded the hieroglyphs for hours without result. It seemed that whatever damage it had suffered in the crash-landing had rendered it finally inoperable. We also inspected the blue egg and the bread-box-like device, but could make no sense of either.

On the Monday morning Vaughan and I took our leave, promising Charles that we would be back the following weekend, and drove to London for the most part in silence and with heavy hearts.

Three days later I received a call from Vaughan.

"Jonathon?"

"Edward? This is a surprise –"

"There have been further developments," he informed me, and my heart began a laboured pounding. "Charles wants to see us at the Grange. Can you be ready in 30 minutes?"

He picked me up at two, and three hours after leaving London we arrived at Aylesbury. As Vaughan turned his car along the narrow lane bound for Fairweather Cranley, I found it hard to believe that we had come this way for the first time just two weeks ago.

Thirty minutes later Cranley Grange came into view,

seemingly gloomier without its surrounding mantle of snow. Twilight was falling, along with the rain, and the Grange appeared dour and isolated set amid the hills and forests of the Chilterns.

Vaughan drove around the back of the house, and we climbed from the car and hurried through the downpour and into the familiar library.

Charles had a roaring fire built, and the claret breathing. He was standing before the hearth with a glass in hand, and he assured us that we would dine well tonight. He seemed heartier than when we had taken our leave of him less than three weeks ago, and I wondered at the reason for his lightened spirits.

"Well, man," I said as I accepted a glass of claret. "What is it?"

I glanced across the room to where the shanath had stood, but it was no longer there.

Charles gestured towards a writing-desk in the corner of the room. "I thought it best to lock away the devices," he said, "in case the Vark came hunting."

"We can safely assume that they've left you unmolested?" Vaughan said.

Charles nodded. "I've seen neither hide nor hair of any beast answering their description."

"And the blue light?" I said.

"No sign of that either, though I must admit I've not looked too closely."

"Then out with it, man!" Vaughan demanded. "We didn't come all this way to play guessing games!"

Charles plucked at his Adam's apple, nodding to himself. I sat down on the chesterfield before the fire, and Vaughan accommodated himself within the padded comfort of an armchair.

Charles remained standing, glass in hand, as befits the teller of the tale we were eager to hear. "I was dining in this room last night," he said. "It was nine o'clock, and I must admit that I had partaken of a glass or two of Jasper's claret. I was more than a little relaxed, and at first I assumed that what I'd heard was no more than something from one of those lucid dreams that sometimes visit one on the borderland of sleep. The sound was sufficiently loud, however, to wake me. I could have sworn that I heard my name called out."

I was sitting upon the edge of my seat. "And?"

"Only silence. I thought nothing of it, and decided to retire. I was about to leave the room when I heard it again."

"Someone calling your name?" Vaughan said.

"Very distinctly. I was awake, and relatively sober. I knew that my senses were not deceiving me."

"And the voice came from where?" I wanted to know.

"I was standing by the door, and the voice issued from behind me." He pointed towards the corner of the room, where stood the writing desk. "The voice said, 'Charles! Charles, are you there?' I turned in amazement, and not a little fear. Cautiously I approached the desk, and the voice came again, calling my name. And now I was certain – it was Jasper's voice, and no mistake."

I leaped up and strode over to the writing desk. "May I?" I asked, indicating the sliding lid.

Charles nodded. "Be my guest."

I slid back the lid to reveal the shanath, the blue egg, and the device that put me in mind of a bread-box.

Charles was saying, "I approached the desk and opened the lid, and to my astonishment found that the blue egg was glowing."

Reverently, I took up the egg in both hands and carried it back to the fire. I sat with it before me, our eyes fixed upon its sky blue, ovoid perfection.

Charles said, "As I stared at it, my brother's voice came again, 'Charles, are you there?' I had overcome my surprise, and was about to reply, when the blue glow died and my brother's voice came no more."

Vaughan was lighting his pipe, frowning as he did so. "So the egg is obviously some kind of wireless device between the stars," he said. "It sounds as though Jasper gave up when he thought you were not home." He grunted a laugh. "I've done the same with the telephone! It seems that some devices, no matter how sophisticated, suffer similar inconveniences!"

Charles went on. "I carried the egg to my bed chamber, and slept with it on my bedside table, in case Jasper was wont to try again. Needless to say, he was not. However, knowing that my brother is a creature of habit, it occurred to me that he was more than likely to try communicating with me again at the same time, nine o'clock, tonight. Hence my summons to you earlier today. I thought you might be interested."

I smiled. "You thought right," I said, and glanced at my watch. "It's not yet seven."

"In that case we have more than ample time for dinner," Charles said. "Cook has prepared wild bore and pheasant, with spotted dick for desert."

We ate in the library, the blue egg taking pride of position in the middle of the table. The food was excellent, as was the wine, and by nine I was sated and a little tipsy, and excited at the prospect of Jasper Carnegie contacting us through the medium of the blue egg.

Five minutes later, as I was yet again filling my glass, the blue egg gave off a great effulgent glow, lighting the entire room.

I sat up and stared at the lambent egg, as did my friends.

Charles leaned forward. He licked his lips nervously. "Jasper, is that you?"

Seconds later a voice came through loud and clear, unmistakably that of Jasper Carnegie. "Charles? Are you there, Charles?"

"Jasper! You don't know how good it is to hear your voice at last!"

"And I yours, Charles. I tried to reach you yesterday, with no luck."

"I heard you, but too late. I thought you might try again. I summoned Vaughan and Langham to the Grange. They're with me as I speak."

"They are? Excellent!"

I leaned forward and addressed my words to the blue egg. "Jasper, are you well?"

"I am very well, my friend. I have done much in the

days I have been away, though the going has been far from easy."

I stared around the table at my friends, hardly able to credit that we were conversing with someone light years distant. It was as if we were talking with him on a telephone line from the very next room.

The blue egg pulsed. "Tell me, have there been any further developments in Hopton Wood? The portal? Have by any chance the Vark shown themselves?"

"Not that we've noticed," Charles replied. "It's been all quiet here, Jasper."

"I'm relieved to hear that. As I've learned recently, the Vark are despicable beings. The pair pursuing Kathan were lone bounty hunters and in all likelihood would not be missed. Also, the Vark would be wary of showing too much of themselves upon a non-star-faring world such as Earth."

Vaughan spoke. "But what of you, Jasper? We're eager to learn of your exploits among the stars. I've been thinking of nothing else since your departure."

We stared at the egg, and his reply could not come soon enough. "When the shanath closed down," Jasper said, "I travelled with Kathan to the transparent city, intending to board a transport ship off-planet."

Vaughan leaned forward and addressed the egg. "A ship? But you still had the shanath, presumably? Couldn't you have simply - ?"

"As marvellous as the shanath is, it is also expensive to use. You have no idea of the cost of the short jump we made from Earth. Our flight is being funded by Kathan's political party in the fourth quadrant, and we can make only the occasional jump via the portal when we find ourselves upon worlds that have no connecting transport."

Vaughan was nodding. "I surmised as much," he said.

Jasper went on, "However, when we arrived at the spaceport, we found the city in chaos. A Vark assault ship had visited the planet the day before, and wrought havoc. A thousand humanoids lay dead or dying in the streets. Kathan told me that this was common Vark practice, in order to subjugate a world. The lizards think nothing of laying waste to entire cities, as a warning. Then, when they come to occupy the planet, the citizens thereon know better than to rebel."

"You paint a bleak picture of the universe," Vaughan said, sadness in his eyes.

"The picture that Kathan has painted over the past few days is bleaker still, my friend. The Vark rule three quarters of the inhabited galaxy with a brutal, blood-thirsty regime. They see all forms of life, whether sentient or not, as their inferiors. As we moved through the city, I beheld ample evidence of this fact. My friends, the horrors I beheld visited upon these innocent people..."

He fell silent for a time; we stared at each other around the table, for once speechless to a man.

At last he went on, "Eventually we found the spaceport and negotiated passage off-planet aboard a slow freighter like a mammoth ocean liner, only ten times the size."

"During the voyage, Kathan took the time to tell me something about himself. His mission in this sector is to contact and form *liaisons* between cells and bands in

opposition to the Vark, raising funds and making public the many iniquities perpetrated upon innocent peoples by the Vark. Kathan is attempting to stir opposition so that when the time comes, the advance of the Vark will not be unopposed."

"And your part in all this?" I asked.

"To be frank, I wondered this myself as I accompanied Kathan across the gulf of space. However, my friend has assured me that all hands are valuable in the fight against evil."

"And where are you now?" Charles asked.

"Two days ago the freighter set down on a mining world, the name of which I can hardly pronounce. So far, the Vark have yet to strike this planet. Kathan is doing his best to alert the government to the threat."

"I can only imagine what you're experiencing," Vaughan murmured, his gaze light years away.

Jasper laughed. "I have thought of you often, Vaughan. You would find this experience grist to the mill of your art, if dispiriting. I must admit that, as I stepped through the jump gate, I dreamed I might be entering a pacific, enlightened future realm."

"I sometimes wish that I had stepped through the shanath too," Vaughan said wistfully, "notwithstanding the horrors you describe."

Charles said, "But you are well in yourself, Jasper?"

There was a short delay, then: "Never better, Charles. Physically, I have never known such health. Which brings me to why I am speaking to you now."

"This is more than just a social call?" I said.

"A little more," Jasper replied. "I will call again tomorrow at the same time. By then I should know whether I can acquire the gift I have in mind."

"The gift?" Charles said, leaning forward and staring at the glowing blue egg.

"I wanted to talk to you today, Charles, in order that you might summon Vaughan and Langham to the Grange. I wanted you to be together when I send you the gift."

"Jasper," Vaughan said, sounding exasperated, "you're talking in riddles! Gifts? Send us something? Explain yourself!"

Jasper laughed. "Is the box-like device you took from Kathan's car safe and sound?"

It stood upon the writing desk in the corner of the room.

Charles said, "We have it with us, Jasper."

"Excellent! Place it beside the egg tomorrow at this time, and with luck you will be in receipt of a marvel."

"Jasper!" Vaughan said.

Our friend among the stars laughed out loud. "I do not want to raise your hopes only to have them cruelly dashed," he said. "There is a chance that I might not be able to acquire this gift. It is not only expensive, but rare, and prohibited on planets such as Earth. But enough! It is late, gentlemen, and I must return to subterranean dwellings where Kathan and I are lodging during our stay on this dour world. Until tomorrow, my friends, I'll bid you good-day."

"Until tomorrow," Vaughan said.

Seconds later the blue glow ceased, and the communiqué from the stars was over for the evening.

We sat in silence for long seconds, each of us perhaps unable to believe what we had heard, dumbfounded as we were by the interstellar conversation.

Charles bethought himself to refill our glasses, which had remained empty and untouched for the duration of the dialogue. I took a deep draft, sat back and laughed aloud.

"I wonder what his gift might be?" Vaughan mused.

"Something that is expensive," Charles said, "and rare, and illegal on Earth? He called it a marvel..."

Vaughan strode to the writing desk and returned with the silver bread-box. It was perhaps two foot by two, and constructed of a thin, silver material that had the appearance of metal but the feel of bakelite. There seemed to be no working parts to it – its sides were too thin to contain machine components – and its only marking was the grid pattern upon its inner shelf. I was intrigued, to say the least.

Vaughan turned the thing this way and that, and finally placed it on the table beside the blue egg.

"It is obviously some transportation device," he said. "A miniature jump portal, perhaps, for objects rather than people. I only hope that it is in full working order, unlike the shanath."

We retired to the fire and conversed until the early hours, each one of us too excited to even think of sleep. It was almost dawn by the time I made my way to my room, sedated by alcohol, but my mind abuzz with wonder.

I awoke late in the morning and breakfasted in the library with Charles and Vaughan. That afternoon I took a stroll around the countryside, hardly able to contain my impatience. I arrived back at the Grange at five to find my friends sampling the claret in the library.

We dined at seven, the blue egg on the table before us, and beside it the mysterious bread-box contraption. We chatted desultorily, our minds on Jasper's imminent communication.

After the meal Charles broke out a fresh bottle of brandy. "In celebration – a little premature, I grant you – of my brother's historic communiqué. To Jasper!"

We raised our glasses. "To Jasper!"

Nine o'clock came and went. Vaughan busied himself by stuffing the bowl of his pipe with Old Holborn and puffing away contemplatively. "Perhaps," he said, "he was unable to obtain the marvel of which he spoke. He did say that he might find it difficult, if you recall."

I was resigning myself to disappointment when, without warning, the egg glowed blue, startling us to various exclamations and cries of delight.

Charles leaned forward. "Jasper? Are you there? Can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear, Charles. Are the others there?"

"We're here," Vaughan and I called out in unison.

"Excellent, gentlemen. I trust you've dined well – and I'll wager that you're partaking of claret or, dare I say, the brandy?"

"The latter," I said.

"I must admit to missing the odd snifter," Jasper said.

Vaughan leaned towards the blue egg and said, "How went it, Jasper?"

Jasper Carnegie laughed, like a parent indulging impatient children. "Better than expected. I rendezvoused with Kathan's courier, and we conducted business."

"A courier?" I echoed.

"A member of Kathan's race. At Kathan's instructions, he smuggled certain... devices, let's say... onto the planet."

"Dare I ask," Vaughan said, "precisely what these devices might be?"

"They are known, my friend, as Styrian serum pistols, and in a matter of seconds I will place them in the transmitter before me. These I will then attempt transfer to the receiver which I trust you have before you. Are you ready?"

"The receiver is sitting in the middle of the table," Charles said, glancing around at us. "We're ready."

"Then prepare yourselves," Jasper said.

I gripped the edge of the table. Charles leaned forward, staring at the receiver box. Vaughan leaned back, puffing his pipe and cocking an eye-brow somewhat sceptically.

Seconds later a piercing whistle filled the room, and the box before us glowed white. There was a miniature thunderclap, and the dazzling white glow vanished. The whistling ceased abruptly.

We stared. Sitting within the receiver box were three implements that resembled small automatic pistols, but of a green hue and of an attenuated, alien design.

"Have they arrived?" Jasper asked.

"They have," Charles said. "But what exactly are they?"

"Take them from the receiver," Jasper instructed. "There's one for each of you."

Charles took the pistols from the box and passed them to Vaughan and myself. The object was extremely light, almost insubstantial, and fitted snugly into the palm of my hand.

I turned it this way and that. In the small butt of the pistol I noticed a transparent window, behind which seemed to be a red, syrupy substance. On the short barrel of the device were three coloured studs, white, red and black.

I glanced at my friends, who were examining their devices with a similar mystification.

"They're weapons, are they not?" Vaughan chanced at last.

Charles said, "Is that right, Jasper? They're weapons to use against the Vark?"

"Are you trying to tell us that we're in danger?" I asked.

Jasper Carnegie was chuckling to himself. "They are not to be used against the Vark," he said, "but upon yourselves."

We stared at each other, and then back at the pistols.

"Would you mind explaining – ?" Vaughan began.

"Delighted to do so," Jasper said. "The Styrian injector contains a substance with a long name which I won't bother you with at this juncture. The substance contains a suspension of up to 100 million microscopic machines."

"Machines!" Vaughan cried. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No joke, I assure you, but the latest Styrian molecular technology."

"And just what," I said, "does this technology achieve?"

I tried to consider the practicalities of a substance which contained 100 million tiny machines, but my imagination was not up to the task.

"Please permit me a small digression," Jasper said, "by way of explanation. Three days ago Kathan gave me just such a device. He said that it was in repayment for services rendered, for helping him evade the Vark and escape through the shanath. He said that its use by certain of the races of the explored universe – humans being one of them – was prohibited by the Vark. But he could not, as a compassionate, sentient being, deny me its benefits. He explained what it contained, and instructed me in its use. Thereupon I applied the pistol to my jugular vein and pressed first the white stud, then the red and the black. I felt an instant sharp pain in my neck, followed by a rush as of blood to my head. There followed an hour of nausea, and then a period of extreme lethargy which lasted for about six hours. Thereafter I experienced an incredible feeling of well-being, which has been with me ever since."

I was aware of my pulse. "You injected yourself," I said slowly, "with 100 million molecular machines?"

"Give or take," Jasper replied, "a few thousand or so."

Vaughan cleared his throat and leaned forward. He addressed the glowing egg. "And would you mind telling us, in your own time, quite why you did this?"

"Not at all, my friend. Each machine of the 100 million or so now circulating around my bloodstream is self-replicating; that is, they replace themselves with exact copies when they come to the end of their allotted life-spans, and are naturally flushed from the system. The exact function of the molecular machines is to facilitate the repair and maintenance of the physical structure of one's soma-form and metabolism, in effect combating the onslaught of disease, viral and bacteriological, and the effect of externally wrought injuries, such as might result from accidents. The molecular machines are known by a phrase, roughly translatable into English as, *Eternal Guardians*."

He paused, and we stared at each other, and allowed the implication of what he had just told us to sink into our shocked senses.

"Did you say," Charles said, "that these machines fight disease, and repair the body after accidents?"

"In a nutshell, Charles, that is what I said."

Vaughan removed his pipe. I saw that his hand trembled as he laid the pipe upon the tablecloth and leaned towards the blue egg. "But in that case, Jasper, they might extend one's life for years."

Jasper allowed the silence to stretch before saying, very quietly, "Not just for years, my friends, but for eternity."

"Are you trying to say," Charles began, "that, that –"

"I am saying, gentlemen, that if you apply the pistol to your jugular vein, or any other large vein or artery, and depress the studs in sequence, then you will effectively render yourselves immortal."

"I don't believe it!" Vaughan cried.

"Impossible!" said Charles.

I pushed my chair from the table and paced the room. I was trembling in every limb and was overcome with sickness. I realized that I was sweating, and tugged at my collar.

I returned to the table. "How can you be sure?" I began.

Jasper replied, "I have talked to people. I have read accounts of the Styrian research. The Styrians are a race

opposed to the hegemony of the Vark, and wish to aid their allies with the immortality serum. Of course, the Vark are ruthless in their extirpation of any race, or individuals, who avail themselves of the Eternal Guardians."

Vaughan asked, "And the Vark? Are they immortal?"

Jasper laughed. "The serum is effective only upon the metabolisms of humanoids. With it, we stand a fighting chance of defeating the Vark –"

"And you have –?" Charles began.

"Yesterday – and I can testify to its almost immediate life-giving properties. I exhort you, gentlemen, to lose no time and use the pistols upon yourselves. Also, I thought it a prerequisite of bestowing this gift that, in each device, there is sufficient serum to treat not only yourself, but one other person of your choosing, should you wish to do so." He fell silent. We stared at the pistols in our hands, and then at each other in wonderment.

"And now, gentlemen, I must say farewell. It might be some time before we speak again. Tomorrow Kathan and I take a ship into the Vark quadrant, and it would be unwise indeed to attempt communication with you when our enemy might intercept the signal."

"Jasper!" I said. "I don't know what to say. Mere thanks are not sufficient."

Jasper laughed. "How could I not bequeath you that which I have already enjoyed? Now do as I did, and administer the serum. Goodbye, my friends."

His voice faded and a second later, before we had time to respond, the blue egg lost its lustre.

I moved like a man in a daze and sat upon the chesterfield before the fire. I was undergoing hot and cold sweats, and my hand gripping the pistol was shaking as if with palsy.

I stared at my friends where they sat, immobile, around the table.

Vaughan said, "Wait, Jonathon! Don't use it yet... It would be foolhardy to rush into this. There are implications which we would be wise to discuss."

"I agree," Charles said. "We need to consider the ramifications of this before we go ahead, or not."

They joined me before the fire, the brandy forgotten, and we sat for a time in a profound silence – like, paradoxically, men handed down a death sentence, and not precisely the opposite.

"Elena..." Vaughan said at last.

I looked up. "Excuse me?"

Vaughan smiled sadly. "My wife, Elena. She died five years ago. If only I had possessed the serum then."

"My God," Charles said, more to himself. "Think of it, just think of it. If we do administer the serum, then everything changes. Our relationships with those with whom we fall in love... Consider: we cannot just administer the remaining serum to our next lover. What is the likelihood that that love will last the test of time?" He smiled bitterly to himself. "And then we will meet others, whom we will love perhaps even more, with the knowledge that that love will be doomed when they age and grow old and we remain forever young."

"Also," Vaughan said, "we will by necessity be forced to live a life of deceit and duplicity. How long will we be able to remain in one community before people begin to

notice that we are not ageing? We'll be forced to move every so often, forever wandering the globe, leaving loved ones and friends and all we have come to hold dear..."

"But consider the alternative," I said. "Death, in 30 or 40 or however many years. And an eternity of oblivion after that."

"Of which we will know nothing," Vaughan said, as if that were any consolation.

"I would rather experience an eternity of existence," I said, "even if does entail ceaseless wandering, and doomed love. Imagine the possibilities, the experiences one would have, freed from the spectre of death. Vaughan, haven't you wanted to live to see whether your novelistic prophecies might come to pass, or the other maybe even stranger or more bizarre futures that might arise instead?"

"There are benefits and drawbacks," Vaughan said, his gaze distant. "But to be granted eternal life while all around you millions are doomed to brief existences... Wouldn't the psychological pressure become too much?"

I shrugged. "Perhaps one would adapt," I said. "And if one did find a true love, with whom to share eternity..."

"Spoken like a true romantic," Charles said, "or a naïve dreamer."

I raised the serum pistol before me. I recalled the many times when I had awoken in the empty early hours of the night, beset with visions of death and oblivion. To be freed from the inevitability of death would surely compensate for all the drawbacks enumerated by Vaughan.

I looked at my friends. "We would not be tied to Earth, either. In time, when humankind is granted the status of a star-faring race, we too could go among the stars."

"Even before that," Charles mused, "if Jasper opens another shanath to Earth."

I shook my head. The possibilities offered by the serum were overwhelming, and I felt compelled to waste no time and press the pistol to my flesh at that very second.

"I have thought long enough," I said. "I appreciate all you've said, but to live without fear of death is worth all manner of hardship."

I found my jugular and placed the nozzle of the pistol against it. I located the studs, gazing across at my friends as they watched me with wide eyes. Vaughan opened his mouth to remonstrate, but too late.

One by one I depressed the studs.

A burning pain stung the flesh of my neck, and then I was taken in a dizzy rush as the serum entered my bloodstream and careered to my brain, bestowing an instant heady euphoria. I slumped back into the chesterfield and laughed aloud.

"Langham," Charles said. "How do you feel?"

"Light-headed best describes it," I reported. "A little drunk, and ecstatic."

I watched Vaughan as he raised the pistol to his neck and, after a second's hesitation, pressed the studs. He slumped back into his chair, his eyes closed.

I looked across at Charles. "Well?" I said.

He was staring at the pistol in his hand, as if weighing the consequences of any action he might take.

I was overcome, then, with the nausea that Jasper had described. I felt dizzy and a little sick, as if at any second

I might lose the contents of my stomach. I stretched out on the chesterfield and stared at the ceiling, sweating profusely. I did not see whether Charles had decided to administer the serum to himself, and cared little.

The nausea lasted about one hour and then I passed into a state of profound and languorous lethargy. My limbs seemed to weigh a ton, and yet at the same time it was as if I were floating above the chesterfield. I closed my eyes and drifted as if under the influence of a powerful anaesthetic.

I came awake later – how much later I was unsure, until I looked up at the carriage clock on the mantel-shelf. It was seven in the morning. I had been unconscious for approximately nine hours.

I sat up, realizing that I was still gripping the pistol that contained the one remaining dose of serum. I slipped it into my pocket and stood. Only then did it come to me that I felt not only invigorated but possessed by a sensation of fitness and well-being such as I had never known before. I felt as though every toxin had been flushed from my system, that every ache and pain had been eased; I felt, then, as I paced the room, possessed of energy and purpose.

Vaughan was slumped in his armchair, the pistol having fallen to his lap. An angry red weal stood out on his neck, where he had administered the serum. I crossed to Charles: he too was unconscious, or sleeping, stretched out upon the settee; he, too, had succumbed to the lure of eternal life and applied the pistol to his neck.

I paced the room, then taken by the need to flee the confines of the library, fetched my overcoat and hurried through the French windows and up the hillside. Dawn was breaking, and it seemed to me the most beautiful sunrise I had ever witnessed: a myriad streamers of cerise and argent laminated the sky to the east. The air was still, and rent with birdsong; I heard the lowing of a distant dairy cow, the barking of a farm dog. The world was waking, and I was awaking with it.

I strode up the hillside and through the wood until I came to the clearing, and continued through it on a path I had never taken before. I was less interested in my destination than in the desire to exercise, to be part of the lightening world around me. At times I even ran, full of boundless energy and even a feeling of unrestrained joy. It was a sensation I dimly recalled from youth: an open acceptance of the wonder of existence, of the million possibilities that lay ahead, untrammelled by such obstacles as adult concerns and conventions. It was as if my mind was open, for the first time in years, to the wonder of reality that we all once felt but which, over time, the blinkers of routine and conformity work to hide from us. I was mentally liberated and physically, too: I walked for miles as the sun rose and the hours passed by in a rush. I had never felt healthier; my body was a perfect machine and my mind was open and alert.

At last I came to the lane above Cranley Grange, where just two weeks ago Vaughan had stopped his car in order to take in the snow-bound view. I paused now on the crest of the rise, and stared down at the Grange

before continuing on my way. I wanted to greet Vaughan and Charles on the first morning of our immortality, and share with them the joy of our renewed existence.

They were in the library when I burst through the French windows. They appeared to have just awoken from their soporific slumber; they were smiling, and stretching their invigorated limbs. I could tell by their expressions that they felt as reborn as I.

I hurried over to the table, snatched up the brandy and glasses and splashed out three generous measures.

We took a glass each and stood before the dying embers of the fire.

I raised my drink. "A toast," I said. "To the future!"

My friends responded. "To the future!" they cried.

It never ceases to amaze me how I have managed to accommodate myself to the fantastic series of events which transpired during the freezing winter of 1935. More amazing still, perhaps, is that I have come to accept the personal, I might even say psychological, changes that the series of events brought about in me.

I often think ahead to the life that awaits me – and dream of a life, perhaps, among the stars.

Eric Brown's last stories here were "The Children of Winter" (issue 163 – winner of the British SF Association Award as best sf short story of 2001), "Ascent of Man" (issue 167), "The Frankenberg Process" (issue 171) and, of course, "The Blue Portal, Part One" (issue 180). An *Interzone* discovery (class of 1987), he lives in West Yorkshire.

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Here is another slippery fish from Michael Swanwick, who specializes in them. He is a genus shifter, a fish of another colour, a century fish. Everything he has ever written – it is increasingly visibly the case from *Stations of the Tide* on – slides out of reach whenever you think you've got it in your sights: just when you finally work out what kind of sf or fantasy novel you're reading, just when you begin to understand why what's happening how to whom when, the floor caves in and your mind falls through. All of Swanwick's recent work – his space opera (*Stations*), his fantasy (*The Iron Dragon's Daughter*) in which menarche and the loss of fantasy are intricately engineered into one story, his Faustian Pact Rake's Progress (*Jack Faust*) – read like slices into the minds' eyes, cuts that open something out.

Bones of the Earth (Eos, \$25.95), at first glance, is perfect Swanwick. It is a time-travel story, a category of the fantastic that could be defined as a story in which the floor of the real world caves in. It is a tale which (following the lead of most previous time-travel novels) exposes the savagery of sex between humans, the cod-godding manipulateness of the bureaucracies which operate the time machines, the cavitated bad-fruit texture of reality when its guts open after the machines have been used too much. *Bones* should have been perfect romp-Swanwick; in the event – though he pulls off an ending of quite extraordinary felicity – I think the romp very nearly went sour on its author.

The problem lies in time travel as a category of tale. Time-travel stories are, to begin with, arcane: mature examples (from 1950 or so), like mature space opera (from 1980 or later), could be described as manifestations of Deep Science Fiction, sf one needs other sf to understand. Indeed, for those unfamiliar with the fantastic as a whole, the premises, assumptions, narrative strategies, affect chaos, paradox-mongering convolutions and general abandon of the time-travel story make it almost unreadable. (*Bones* is a lot less contorted than most, but it is still no book to give to a stranger.) So the time-travel story, like space opera, lives way inside sf.

But this concierge-floor insideness, which flatters those with elevator keys to the arcanum, is not the final real problem Swanwick had to solve. What he, and any modern sf writer, has primarily to deal with is the fact that time travel is in fact not good sf to begin with; because the time-travel story, being unending change *without continuity*, is a ringer at the heart of genre. This needs a bit of explanation.

Let us go back (very quickly) to the beginnings of sf, circa 1765-1820 or so, dates which roughly frame the long

Out of the Ashes of the 20th Century

John Clute

historical moment when the Modern Age was born, when Time began to vibrate like infrasound (see below) under the feet of Europeans, engulfing them (they are us), for the first time in human history, in a world scored by the music of Time, a world where Time scores a passage from the past day into a new day different from the previous day (not a day which returns to, or cannot again achieve, that previous day: a day, in other words, which seems utterly *next*). Suddenly, during this half century, the Past manifests itself in the form of Ruins; suddenly the present is irradiated by Futurity. It is here, where Time has begun to keep the score, that sf begins. The origins of sf lie not in the contemplation of Space, but in the complex interac-

tion between Ruins and Futurity. It is only now – as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) demonstrates – that sf begins to *smell* like sf. When sf begins to smell *anxious*.

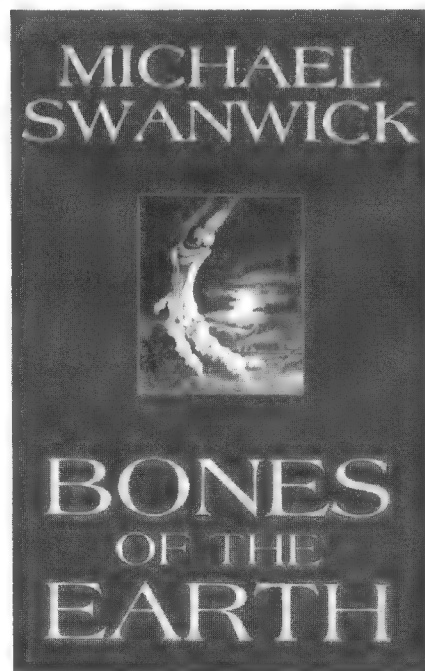
The vital thing here, though, is that sf treats the anxious centuries as given; and it is the given, in sf, that is continued out of into redemptive futurity. Sf, in other words, deals with the anxieties which are its given (and ours), sf stories help readers tolerate and even surf a world (it is our world) that has cavitated. (Reality is the holes which fill the Albert Hall.) Sf says ride the change.

Time-travel sf, on the other hand, being about nothing but change, offers no such solace, offers no saddle to ride. Time-travel sf is pure anxiety. It tells us that the nausea we have felt for 200 years is all she wrote. That there is no home at the end of our time travel through these centuries of world decay. That ultimately there is no story outward. A deep dull angst afflicts the reader of the time-travel tale, a reality fatigue, a pocked attenuation of the eye of imagination. Time-travel sf is, one might say, these days, all too much like living.

Bones of the Earth almost falls into the trap of imitation, or desperateness. Though it is told with concision and high intelligence, the story seems deadly familiar. A palaeontologist is shown the head of a dinosaur that had been alive a few hours before. Sworn to secrecy, he is inducted into a mysterious programme – run by a cynical bureaucracy – devoted to the intensive study of the Cretaceous Period, concentrating on the Maastrichtian Age 65,000,000 years ago, when an extinction event – 21st-century speculation focuses today on the Chicxulub



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impactor, a meteorite hit that profoundly shocked the world – killed off the dinosaurs. But doubles of various characters from differing time-lines (or from differing points on the same time-line) begin to macerate the storyline, signals of reality-threatening slurs or anomalies are reiterated, and a certain deep dull anxiety (see above) begins to grey the world. Swanwick seems to have trapped himself in the kind of story you cannot cut with a knife, because it has already deconstructed the ladders of telling.

But slowly, inchworm, something begins to happen. The storyline itself simplifies radically into two streams. The first conveys more of the same depressive lassitude: in the far future, versions of some of the main protagonists prepare to beg the non-human donors of time-travel science not to shut down the whole enterprise of time travel and the sciences based upon it; whether or not they succeed will depend on whether this incomprehensible far-future species can “forgive,” for incomprehensible reasons, the creation of a deeply dangerous time-line anomaly back in the 21st century. But, far more interestingly, in the second stream of story, we are shown the lives of a scientific team trapped in the Maastrichtian Age, where something quite remarkable happens, which saves the book.

Throughout *Bones of the Earth*, Swanwick has allowed his characters moments to expound elatedly on the miracles of life in previous eras; we have read a great deal about dinosaurs, some real, some apparently made up by the author. It has been fun; it certainly pulled this reader through some fairly deep dull coils of cavitating. But now, with the trapped crew, the novel shifts into a more intense gear, an elated discourse on the process of learning about the world as the team begins to explore its terrain, glorying in the intense overwhelming fecundity of life, anatomizing the nature of things.

One of the team members arrives at a genuinely fascinating explanation for the extinction event. It has already been determined in the novel that predator dinosaurs farm and “ranch” their prey, singing infrasound commands that lead other dinosaur species to green pastures where they can be fed up to eatable weight. What if – one of the team speculates – dinosaur migration is similarly controlled by the infrasound song of the Earth itself, the song of tectonic plates shifting in the crust of the planet? And what if the impact of the Chicxulub meteor is so great that it detunes the song of the Earth for a decade or a century, deafening the dinosaurs so they can’t migrate? And so they starve?

Bones of the Earth is saved in the end because – after the nausea of interminable change it has flirted with, the disintegrating rails it does not seem to wish to parse – it fastens itself to a love of the world, a deep unselfish love of learning the world. The last pages of the tale – an intensely sexed liebestod whose worldly gaiety rewrites our understanding of two of the three protagonists – only intensifies the relief. Out of the ashes of time travel, its tangles and attenuations mercifully forgotten, Swanwick has created, by the skin of his teeth, something positive.

It was a close call, perhaps. But *Bones of the Earth* begins to tell.

From the get-go *Redshift: Extreme Visions of Speculative Fiction* (Roc, \$24.95) is in your face, and it’s two-faced, and it weighs a lot. One of its faces glares Janus into the past at the Harlan Ellison of long ago, who is the dedicatee of the volume, and whose example – “My initial inspiration,” says editor Al Sarrantonio, “was Harlan Ellison’s *Dangerous Visions*, the publication of which in 1967 changed the science fiction field forever” – we are formally instructed to keep in mind as we read the 30 brand-new stories collected here, which is why *Redshift* is so heavy. The second face of the book peers in the opposite direction, futurewards, at the terra incognita of the new century that Al Sarrantonio thinks the stories collected here are going to shine the light of sf upon, he hopes.

And before any more is said about *Redshift* as a project, it should be made clear that about half the stories here assembled are very good indeed (a very high percentage of hits in an original anthology) and that none of

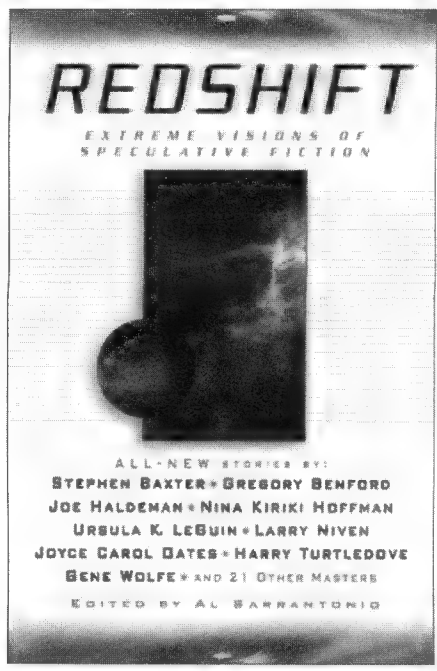
them is actually rotten. Sarrantonio has clearly edited with his hands on and he seems to have thought a lot about the order in which he presents the material he bought: themes and iconography from one story tend to surface, transformed, in the next; the bad stories have been sorted so as somehow not to corrupt the barrel.

There are, moreover, almost no bottom-drawer tales here from “famous” vanity-plate authors whose veteran status allows them the occasional bummer, the kind of story that should be signed “Vet (Failed).” Those authors who are new or newish are included on merit mostly, not promise. There are no stories which go on too long, and several – Neal Barrett’s long stunning “Rhido Wars,” which depicts hominid life in a context savagely pre or post our own, maybe a few terrible centuries into life on a generation starship, but who knows? – seem to stop way too soon, as though a novel had been pounded into pemmican. *Redshift* is big, bustling, bristly, buy it.

As a project, on the other hand, if we are going to take its editor seriously about its goals, *Redshift* is a load of old codswallop, for there is no genre prison left for *Redshift* to escape from. Its claimed model in the field, *Dangerous Visions*, broke taboos by the dozen because (as Sarrantonio does admit) they were there to be broken. In 2002, the walls are shattered, the world lies before us, what we see is what we get, and few forbidden topics remain, except, as Sarrantonio once again is the first to make clear, political correctness.

There is, for instance, a lot of sex in *Redshift*, some of it really pretty interesting, and most of it sufficiently explicit to have burned pulp to ash a few decades ago; but not now. Only one story – Elizabeth Hand’s “Cleopatra Brimstone,” worthily the longest tale in the book – is both sexually explicit and deeply incorrect. (I’ll say no more about Hand, whom I’ve not reviewed since we got to know each other too well, about half a decade ago, for me to continue pretending to be objective; but can suggest this: that “Cleopatra Brimstone” builds fruitfully on what I thought was so interesting in her work when I reviewed *Waking the Moon* in *Interzone* 90.)

Gene Wolfe’s “Viewpoint” is also unpc, a deliciously surly take on the modern mega-state, and media, and people who rob people and don’t respond well to kindness; and the constraints of focus which govern its protagonist’s perceptions make it a fitting side-saddle to *The Book of the Short Sun*. Joe Haldeman’s “Road Kill” is not so much un-pc as nearly intolerable: told at an icy remove – the story is couched as a kind of movie synopsis – it has some of the effect of those fictions which attempt through estrangement to con-



vey some sense of Final Solutions.

Joyce Carol Oates's "Commencement" is richly and intensely couched, but ultimately damned silly. Michael Moorcock's "A Slow Saturday Night at the Surrealist Sporting Club," which is an explicit homage to Maurice Richardson's *The Exploits of Engelbrecht* (1950), sprawls comfortably within the club-story model it's based on, clutches its lapels and comes out with some absolutely hilarious blasphemies about our brave species. Thomas M. Disch's "In Xanadu," which he dedicates to the memory of the great John Sladek, places a protagonist who could be Sladek in a Coleridgean VR paradise for the dead who can pay for the privilege; but the resort is on the skids, and a fate worse than death awaits the damsel with a dulcimer: "In Xanadu" is the finest memorial Sladek has yet received. Ursula K. Le Guin deposes in a tone of godly calm another parable about Balance, couched as an anthropological note. Dan Simmons, in "On K2 with Kanakaredes," does high mountains (with aliens) (with gusto). And half a dozen other stories could be mentioned. There is a lot here.

What there is not – and it may have been a bad instinct on Sarrantonio's part to allow us to think there might be – is any sense of consensus about the nature of the Fantastic in the new century. A huge amount could be said here about why it may be a bit soon to announce the project of sf for the new millennium, and to tell us how sf will shape our perceptions of the macerating badlands we (it seems) may have already trespassed into. What *Redshift* says – either through the introducing mouth or story choices of its editor, or through the stories themselves – is very nearly nothing about all that.

What can be said about sf and the next world is this: that the sf we have known all our lives, and the sf and fantasy and horror assembled in *Redshift*, have one home and one overarching venue. That home and venue is the great anxious 19th and 20th centuries of ago. The genres of the fantastic – sf, horror, fantasy, supernatural fiction – fit these centuries hand in glove. They are the literature of these centuries.

What we may now be beginning to guess, perhaps, is that the door to the old future has shut behind us. The secret of the 21st century may be terribly simple: that there is nothing left to be anxious about, because it is already happening, the Beast that slouched to Bethlehem is born. To embrace a world like that, a world which acts like sf without our having to push the start button, the genres of the fantastic will need to face some pretty radical surgery.

Redshift may be the best anthology

published in several years. But it comes too soon to tell us what we face, and it should not have pretended to try. It is not a manual for the surgeon.

There is no mistaking the signposts that point our way into *Vitals* (HarperCollins, £17.99). Do not expect (the signals warn us) to find within these covers a hard-argument sf novel such as Greg Bear once wrote. Do not expect *Blood Music* (1984), even though his new novel does deal with something like a hive mind; nor *Eon* (1985), for though *Vitals* does climax on a ship bigger than one can easily grasp in the mind's eye, that ship is a 2,000-foot condo cruiser similar to several now under construction, not a rama from beyond the fields we know.

The first warning signal is the dust jacket, on which the word "thriller" appears lots and lots, and "science fiction" not at all. The second signal is the header for the first chapter (it reads: "May 28. San Diego, California"), in which we are given, in high day-after-tomorrow-porn technothriller style, the precise day and month that the action begins, *but not the year*. (Technothrillers are rather like the secret sciences and conspiracy-ridden governments that make up their subject matter: information is always *owned* by somebody, and is generally released to readers in feverish partial snippets, as though security had been breached for us alone.) All we can guess, from context, is that *Vitals* takes place early in the current century.

The third signal is the first sentence of the tale, as narrated by its main protagonist, Hal Cousins, an ambitious young scientist: "The last time I talked to Rob [he tells us], I was checking my luggage at Lindbergh Field to fly to Seattle and meet with

an angel." If *Vitals* were going to be pure sf, we would read "angel" as an open metaphor, leading us who knows where, into who knows what exogamy with tomorrow. But as the header has already told us we're reading a book cast in technothriller mode, we guess that the angel metaphor is expressive of knowledge (of knowingness) that already exists, that the word angel does not open but close, that the angel will prove to be a donor of money. (We guess right.)

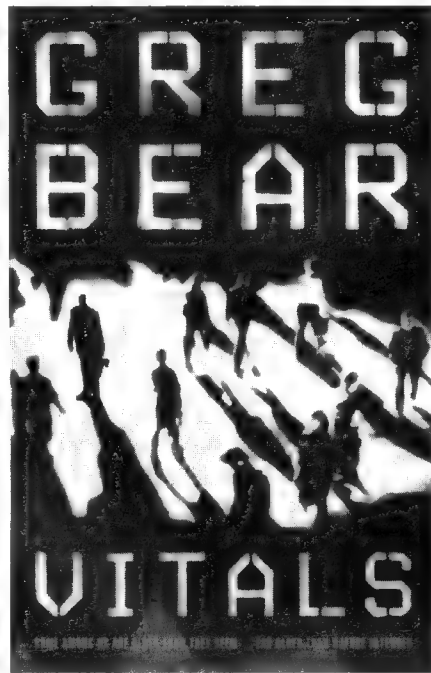
The fourth signal surfaces at the top of the second page of text, where we learn that Rob – who has just hung up on Hal after giving him a mocking, gnomonic message, and who will be reported dead in less than a month – is in fact the narrator's twin brother. And we begin to sense that Greg Bear is playing a complex game of destabilization with us, and we begin to feel a premonitory tickle of dis-ease, the way birds sense a coming earthquake. Because we have passed lickety-split through portals of sf and technothriller, and we now we are in the world of horror.

We remain there, with the twins.

It is certainly not the case that no sf novel has ever featured twins, though in sf twins usually turn out to be avatars or mirrors of the protagonist, and function therefore as amplifiers of that protagonist hero's ultimate selfhood and power. Nor is it the case that no horror novel has ever *not* featured twins, though twins are very common indeed in that genre, where they generally serve as conduits from the past who surface into the protagonist's world in order to deform his future. Twins are termites of the scaffolding of the self in daylight, they are phagocytes of the world day. Their roots may lie in the chaos and old night of those aspects of reality we have not yet brought under control and therefore, self-deludingly, describe as being over with; but what they bring to their other selves (and vicariously to all the readers of horror over the last two centuries or so of unrelenting historical transformation) is a nausea of change. Horror is a hook to draw the future down. Twins carry the hook. Twins are *contagious*.

So it is, in *Vitals*.

Though their careers have been separate, Hal and Rob Cousins are both life scientists, both have concentrated on the dilemma of human ageing, and both have come to a similar conclusion: that human ageing is (very roughly: Bear is far more competent at making up science than this reviewer could dream of being) a function of our commensal intimacy with bacteria. Hal does not know what Rob has been up to; what he himself wants, as the novel opens, is to get a chance to analyze primitive cells from the ocean depths, cells which have not



yet imported mitochondria into their operating systems; for it is through mitochondria, which were once autonomous bacteria, that instructions are conveyed to the cells they inhabit to begin dying.

Hal's angel, a computer billionaire, gives him some money, and access to the Pacific benthos; but after a chapter or two of deep-sea sf stuff (itself interspersed with technothriller sabotage stuff), Hal is barred from any further scientific spelunking, and his angel disappears from the book completely. Whether or not Hal was about to make a conceptual breakthrough in the ocean depths weighs little in the end, because *Vitals* is not, as we've suggested, really sf at all. *Vitals* is horror, it is only interested in the future insofar as the past has contaminated it, and (as we slowly learn) the main discoveries have already been made.

They were made in the 20th century. And (as we slowly learn) it is the 20th century – "You study the twentieth century long enough," says Hal at one point, "you want to pack a gun" – that governs *Vitals*, and shapes the world to come. Tormented by clues dropped by his brother, Hal gradually discovers a truth which Rob had discovered earlier: that in the 1930s a Russian scientist named Golokhov had encountered "the Little Mothers of the World" – the vast primitive bacterial communities which began to shape our destiny a billion years ago –

and from this discovery learned two things: how to begin to modify human beings so that, one day, we might be immortal; and how, through associated processes, to "tag" human beings with bacterial agents which, on interacting with our vitals, brought us under remote control.

It is the second discovery whose consequences shape *Vitals*, somewhat to its detriment, as a great deal of time is spent tracing Hal's attempts to stay uncontaminated, and to work out just who among his colleagues and friends has already been tagged. The seemingly dead Rob, whose hints and twin traps shape Hal's writhing course forwards into the new century, is both tagged and not tagged, victim and torturer, twin below and (ultimately) twin above.

But the saliva of machination that spoors the intimate twin-jousts pales, in the end, beside the underlying horror of Bear's vision. Golokhov, it turns out, has been tagging the 20th century world for 70 years or more. Stalin was tagged, and other genocidal monsters; the American government is tagged; the illuminati of the era are tagged; the apparatchiks and the secret police and the neighbourhood cops are tagged. Immortality (when it comes) will be owned by those who tag, by those responsible for what the 20th century has done to the expression on the human face in history.

"Listen to Orwell, Grasshopper," Ben

[a seemingly untagged colleague of Hal] said sententiously.

"What about Orwell?"

"The true and authentic voice of the twentieth century." Ben drew quote marks in the air. "If you want a vision of the future, imagine ■ boot stamping on a human face – forever."

Vitals may be something of a spatchcock tale: big head, tiny non-sf lungs, easily winded; but it is, all the same, a very modern and valiant 21st-century take on the nature of the past which shapes us still. And it deals with exactly the material that sf writers are almost certainly going to have to deal with, in retrospect, for some time to come. Like John le Carré, whose recent novels transform the dead Cold War into a Commedia dell'Arte revel, Greg Bear and his colleagues have something dead and binding to deal with, as writers of responsibility: the last century.

So dance Bear. There are lots of Twins to behead.

John Clute

Note: The above reviews first appeared in electronic, online form, variously in *The Infinite Matrix*, edited by Eileen Gunn at www.infinitematrix.net, and in *SF Weekly*, edited by Scott Edelman at www.scifi.com/sfw – to whom, thanks. They make their first print appearance here, specially revised for *Interzone*.

Neal Asher's *The Skinner* (Macmillan, £9.99, trade pb) is set in the same narrative universe as his first full-length novel, *Gridlinked* (Pan, £6.99), while a third venture into the Polity worlds is already on its way. What might function as background colour for other authors, or as ostentatious evidence of sf's inventiveness, seems instead to form part of a larger, coherent network of narratives for Asher. So it is that the world of Spatterjay, mentioned in passing in *Gridlinked* (pp154-7), moves centre-stage in *The Skinner*. And conversely, the transportation technology that dominates Asher's first novel – the Runcible – becomes background detail in *The Skinner*.

Exchanging focal points across novels, Asher nevertheless develops tales that are concerned with similar themes and motifs. Augmented or hive minds play an important role in both novels; indeed, it is a hornet hive/collective that quite literally provides the sting in the tale of *The Skinner*. And this is a tale that is dominated by its setting, Spatterjay being a largely oceanic world that is populated by a profusion of dangerous and lethal marine life, from hammer whelks through to prill, glister and leeches. Asher's realization of Spatterjay's sym-

ning this view of natural brutality and indifference up against his main plot allows Asher to parallel various narrative power-plays, providing a counterpoint to the vicious schemes of certain characters.

Spatterjay is not, however, only a place of death. The masterstroke of Asher's invented ecosystem is that it includes a virus which creates binding fibres in its host, granting powers of vastly accelerated adaptation that render the person almost immortal. Wounds heal up instantly, and chunks of flesh can be lost and replaced. Various forms of life have evolved to make the most of viral possibilities, including "boxies," creatures that can be stripped of their flesh, having a detachable spinal cord around which they can regrow their bodies. Hoopers, humanoid inhabitants of Spatterjay, carry the virus that grants them extreme durability, but still they live in fear of poisonous leeches that can hideously mutate or kill any Hooper unlucky enough to encounter them. Asher thus creates a violent world perfectly suited to his story of war crimes, slavery and long-delayed vengeance, but a world that also contains its own checks, balances, and possibilities for the destruction of even the oldest Hooper.

Resurrections and Reincarnations

Matt Hills

biotic ecosystem is nothing short of dazzling. Each chapter begins cleverly with an italicized section, these forming an ongoing narrative that recounts Spatterjay's war of all against all, as each different form of aquatic life feeds and is fed upon. In this food chain, every predator can become prey. Run-

Given its emphasis on exaggerated matters of life and death, and with its take on the sf-action-thriller carrying mythic resonances, *The Skinner* almost inevitably deals with the topic of resurrection. One leading character is a "reif" or reification, meaning that he is dead and decaying although kept "alive" by cybertech. A scientifically vindicated version of horror's classic zombie figure, this reif acts as a force for revenge, while other characters are also reborn or resurrected in some sense, most notably war criminal Spatterjay Hoop, or "the Skinner" as he becomes known, and Captain Ambel, whose role in the Prador wars is unclear. Resurrection and rebirth do not only work to preserve the individual in Asher's work; they also act dynamically, questioning principles of self-identity.

Further transformations are at work in *Gridlinked* and *The Skinner*. Asher also likes to revisit and rework the popularity of media sf and horror/fantasy. Reading *The Skinner*, I was struck by the way that its eponymous bogeyman is described so as to recall a key special-effects moment from John Carpenter's film version of *The Thing*. The Skinner is composed of a bodiless head and a headless body, both of which have the ability to adapt through forced evolution, and at one point we witness the head's ability to grow spatulate legs and scuttle away sans body (p265). Even if none of Asher's characters mutter the line "You've gotta be f**king kidding!", anyone familiar with Carpenter's film will be able to fill in the blanks. Asher's adventure-led depictions of intergalactic politics and his sarcastic droids also appear reminiscent of pop sf films such as *Star Wars*, although this is an evolved *Star Wars* in which good and evil are not simplistically separated only to be shuf-

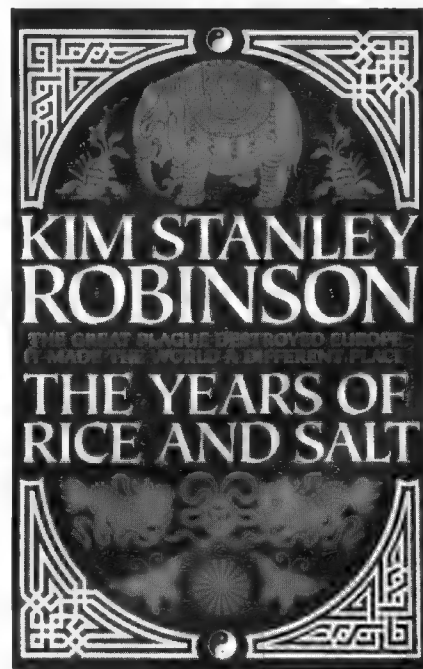
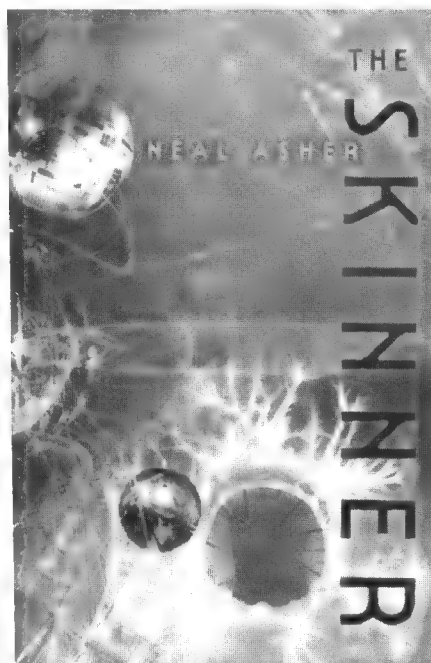
fled mechanically back together, but instead where complex motivations and characters exist alongside an extended narrative universe. Iain M. Banks once wrote an excellent novella which explicitly compared *Star Wars* to his own story's "real" alien visitation ("The State of the Art"), and which self-referentially staged a battle between literary and media sf. Asher is less obviously self-referential, and less combative in his stance towards media sf. His novels are packed with high pulp incident and action, seeming to retain an affection for the different forms of sf that stream through pop culture. In terms of "literary" sf antecedents, it is probably Banks's work which seems the closest relative, since both his Culture novels and Asher's Polity books revolve around matters of scheming interplanetary control and intervention, fusing space opera, cyberpunk, media sf tropes and political commentary.

However, Asher's work is by means an imitation of Banks's, even if the Polity does seem to recall the Culture, and even if both writers have a taste for writing streetwise or irreverent AIs/droids. For one thing, Asher has arguably yet to fully dissect the ethos and politics of the Polity, and for another, his work is far closer to the action-adventure-thriller and the horror genre than are Banks's sf novels. And if anyone still imagines that likening an sf writer's work to action-thriller-horror genres means that it can't really be sf, or that it can't be good sf, then they need to pick up one or both of Asher's novels. *Gridlinked* and *The Skinner* demonstrate that zombies, mutants, killer leeches, spies and assassins can all be placed within detailed, scientifically underpinned and extrapolated worlds, with the strengths of sf literature being used to resurrect dead clichés of popular narrative.

It is reincarnation, not resurrection, that provides the meat to Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Years of Rice and Salt* (HarperCollins, £16.99). Publicized as "alternate history" sf, and already much compared to Jon Courtenay Grimwood's "Arabesk" sequence, *The Years of Rice and Salt* details a minutely worked-out history in which Europe has never existed, and in which the Chinese build up a world-spanning empire, while North America fails to become a superpower, instead appearing in the novel as a kind of matriarchal idyll on the brink of being colonized. Spotting differences and similarities between history as we are taught it and as this grand novel recounts it, provides more than an occasional *frisson*. And yet, I think that characterizing Kim Stanley Robinson's enterprise here as "alternate history" does it something of a

disservice. This is a creation that reiterates, and deviates from, its own patterns far more than it scores points by reimagining swathes of world history. Yes, the novel includes lovingly drawn counterfactual maps, and yes, it includes an equally counterfactual timeline. For those likely to appreciate the fullest intricacies of Robinson's well-researched world-reconstruction, such things will be more than welcomed. But these are devices that mask the essential reiterations of the novel, which are repetitions and transformations of individual characters rather than of cultural/social history.

While it may be accurately billed as an sf epic, *The Years of Rice and Salt* delightfully avoids two possible traps of the form – either following a familial cast of characters and their descendants over time, or tracking a familiar cast of immortal, genetically altered super-folk who can endure across centuries of narrated time. By dealing with characters who are variously reincarnated as part of a *jati* – a group of souls whose fates are bound together and who rise towards enlightenment together – Robinson is able to map subtle changes and repetitions in character. Each of the novel's ten "books" or sections deals with at least one distinct reincarnation, and sometimes our many-named heroes are dispatched and reincarnated within the narrative thread of a single book. Gender and age are mutable across incarnations, and in an especially moving part of the novel, one character is condemned to return as a tiger rather than as a human. The different books typically conclude with a section reviewing the karmic progress, or lack thereof, that has been made by the *jati* as characters rail against their fates, swear to attack the Gods, or attempt to preserve



memories of their past lives. This pattern is disrupted and surmounted by the conclusion to the novel's final section, which presents a masterful summary of the ways in which materialist science has failed to dispel the cultural desire for reincarnation. Habit, genetics, language, history, memory: these supra-individual patterns can all persist over time, allowing for a repetition that is metaphorically akin to reincarnation. Science doesn't kill off the religious and superstitious faith in reincarnation, or so suggests the novel's endgame. On the contrary, science recaptures the power of this faith, carrying it forward in new shapes and guises so that "reincarnation" is itself newly incarnated.

Kim Stanley Robinson constantly plays knowing, erudite games with the reader. Intending that reincarnated characters will be identified by their initials, for example B-, K-and I-, Robinson deliberately withholds characters' names here and there. Another game is the variation of character relationships, and yet another involves guessing how the *jati* will or won't develop across its cycles of reincarnation. Different readers are likely to be drawn, no doubt as a matter of karma, to different parts of the novel. My particular favourite was book four, "The Alchemist," which sees a returning character cast as Khalid, proto-scientist and exponent of the experimental method. Renouncing his past, in this life, as a transmuter of base metal into... well, nothing other than more base metal, Khalid sets out to test the assertions of earlier philosophers such as Aristotle, and ends up (re)staging famous experiments from the (real) history of science. This process culminates in the postulation of a GUT, whose unifying force is likened to love. Even while didactically working in scientific principles, Robinson never loses sight of the poetry of science fiction. Although history as we know it may have been overwritten, science and love remain absolute constants in the alchemist's world.

Robinson is an accomplished storyteller, crafting his material carefully. Individual sections and stories of the novel more than stand up on their own, and the reincarnation strand is delicately overlaid rather than forced home to the reader over and over again. *The Years of Rice and Salt* is one of those novels – by which I mean that if it wasn't classified as sf or as written by an sf author, then it would probably be the darling of the *literati* for its Buddhist philosophy and its world-historical scope. At one point, Robinson, via an omniscient narrator, poses the following questions:

"Looking back down the vale of the ages at the endless recurrence of their reincarnations... they could see no pattern at all to their efforts... if it was not just

mindless repetition..., no one could discern it. ...Why read on? ...Why submit to such cruelty, such bad karma, such bad plotting? The reason is simple: these things happened. They happened countless times, just like this." (p297)

Of course, "such bad plotting" resolves into subtle patterns that can be discerned by the reader, as the epic form is taken apart and put back together again. But by asking such things, Robinson challenges our preconceptions of plotting, as well as the expectation that we will follow a single set of lives or characters through the course of a novel.

Where Neal Asher uses sf to breathe new life into well-known character types and adventure plots, envisaging a

startling futuristic ecology in *The Skinner*, Robinson uses sf to reimagine the past. Neither author relies entirely on anything as conventional as linear narrative – Asher by virtue of the way that his novels link incrementally together, layering into a fuller view of different Polity worlds, races and technologies; Robinson by dint of reincarnation's cycles, and the complex layering of life upon life, plot upon plot, that happens across the pages of *The Years of Rice and Salt*. But each author displays different aspects of sf's playful self-fixation – Asher engaging intelligently with pulp, space opera and media sf, Robinson relocating from Mars to Earth, and from extended life to repeated lives.

Matt Hills

Audio Reviews

Paul Beardsley

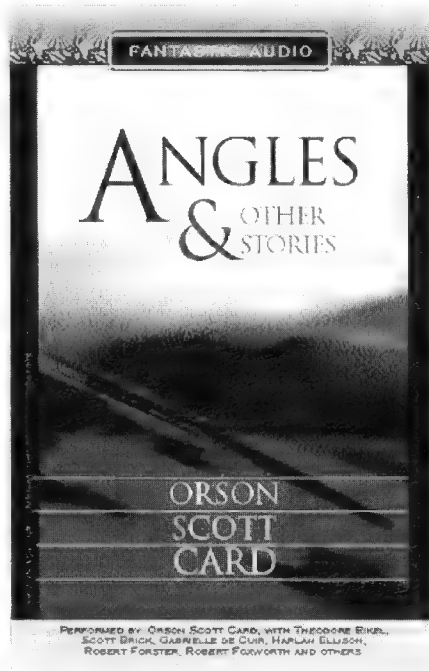
When considering the various adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings*, it occurs to me that Tolkien's trilogy is not necessarily the definitive version. It is, after all, an account of imaginary events rather than a novel as such – and those same events are covered in a few paragraphs in *The Silmarillion*. Granted, "Of the Rings

of Power and the Third Age" is a little short on detail, but the prose is grander, and we're spared all that twee stuff about eleventy-first birthday parties and Tom Bombadil.

So what is the definitive version, if it isn't the book? Not the animated film, alas, as it was never finished. Certainly not the recent live-action movie, for reasons too many to list. No, my money's on Brian Sibley's radio adaptation.

First broadcast in 1981, Sibley's *The Lord of the Rings* has been repackaged as three CD sets, each instalment more-or-less corresponding to one of the books in the trilogy. (Each set consists of 4 CDs, 4 hrs 30 min, £24.99.) New material has been added: Ian Holm – Bilbo in the movie – has reprised his role as Frodo, an older and wiser hobbit commenting on his adventures in a series of prologues and epilogues. This is not especially illuminating but it does add a certain emotional depth. The music used throughout the production – consisting mainly of harps and choirs – is collected on a CD in the third disc set; it's good stuff if you're in the mood for it.

Highlights for me include the very sympathetic portrayal of Gollum (Peter Woodthorpe – he was also on the soundtrack of the cartoon), the verbal sparring between Gandalf (Michael Hordern) and Saruman (Peter Howell),



several instances of sung narration (a brave and successful move), and the climax on Mount Doom. Among many others. I managed to cram all 13 hours into two days – an exhilarating listening experience, and one which I strongly recommend.

Inevitably some sequences from the book didn't make it; especially missed is the scene in *The Two Towers* in which Pippin tricks an orc into thinking he's the Ring Bearer. But it's evident that Sibley encompassed as much of the epic as was reasonably possible, without making any jarring changes to appease an imaginary section of the audience.

I was hoping Philip Pullman's "Sally Lockhart" books would get the same audio treatment as *His Dark Materials*, with dialogue performed by a full cast of actors and narration by the author himself. It didn't happen, alas. Still, the tape set of the first volume, *The Ruby in the Smoke* (4 cassettes, 6 hrs 35 min, £14.99), is unabridged, and Anton Lesser's reading is top notch, so I can't really complain.

Sally Lockhart is a spirited young Victorian woman, recently orphaned in circumstances that appear to have something to do with the ruby of the title. Her investigations take her to some dangerous parts of 19th-century London, and into conflict with the evil Mrs Holland. The story contains no fantasy elements, but there's an almost supernatural quality to it all: the ruby's curse, Mrs Holland's web of influence, and the delirious opium-induced dreams – the smoke of the title.

My only complaint is that I found it difficult to keep track of the roles of the various minor characters – some of whom meet with rather arbitrary fates. Otherwise, this is one for total immersion – it has an atmosphere thicker than an old-time London fog.

The latest audio-only "Doctor Who" release is the penultimate William Hartnell story, *The Smugglers* (2 CDs, 1 hr 40 min, £13.99), an amiable but unremarkable purely historical yarn set in 17th-century Cornwall. Anneke Wills, who plays the companion Polly, is the only woman so far to provide narration. She's very good, and I hope she'll return to do *The Underwater Menace*.

(All the above titles available from BBC Worldwide Ltd.)

Fantastic Audio have released a collection of 16 unabridged short stories by Orson Scott Card, called *Angles and Other Stories*. (6 Cassettes, 9 hrs, priced at \$32 – worth checking Amazon for a UK price.) Readers include Card himself, Harlan Ellison, and over a dozen others. I loved some and hated others. The title story considers travel between parallel worlds, combining thought-experi-

ment with adventure. "A Sepulchre of Songs" is a very moving account of a severely disabled girl losing touch with reality. "Kingsmeat" and "A Thousand Deaths" both manage to add to the overall misery in the world; the latter struck me as being trite as well as unpleasant. On the other hand, "Homeless in Hell" and "A Cross-Country Trip to Kill Richard Nixon" are rather more uplifting. "Deep Breathing Exercises" is based

on a very neat and surprisingly simple idea. Unusually for Card, "Memories of My Head" is wholly unbelievable. Other pieces include a fairy tale and three non-fantastic stories, of which "Hitching" is the most entertaining.

Card is a writer I've been meaning to get round to reading for a long time. This collection has proved to be a very good introduction.

Paul Beardsley

Buffy Anne Summers – with A Mouthful of Tongues

Paul Brazier

Buffy the Vampire Slayer is that much sought after commodity, a television show that manages to appeal to nearly everyone. From pre- or early-teen adolescent girls who identify every moment with the predicament of Dawn, Buffy's younger sister, to misunderstood middle-aged men who fantasize about starring at last in a coffee advert, there is something here for you.

I have to declare a lack of interest. I don't much like *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. I do think it is marvellously well done and I do think it provides a remarkable role model for girls (although I was concerned to hear from a friend recently that her daughter who had been bullied at school had suddenly discovered Buffy and subsequently faced down her assailants in the playground – "Buffy gave me the nerve," she is reported to have said, which is slightly alarming coming from an eight-year-old); but I don't really react to it on the deep levels that everyone else seems to find.

Or at least I didn't until I read *Reading the Vampire Slayer: An Unofficial Critical Companion to Buffy and Angel* (Tauris Parke Paperbacks, \$14.95), a collection of critical essays and an episode guide edited and introduced with a gentle but piercing wit by Roz Kaveney. Here we have a rather disparate group of individuals, some academics, some journalists, writing learned and in-depth articles about a schoolgirl fantasy television programme. What on Earth could have got into them? What on Earth could have got into Kaveney? I read this book with no little interest,

and quite a lot of trepidation. But I needn't have worried.

The only thing any reader could reasonably expect from any such book would be insight. Insight into what, we shall see, but if a book of critical essays can't offer insight into *something*, then it is surely completely useless (as, indeed, has been much of the academically-styled "critical" writing that that has come my way recently). The fascinating thing about this book is that this eclectic crew actually helped me to a better grasp of the programme, and also one or two other problems.

Take for instance Boyd Tonkin's essay, "Entropy as Demon," where, among other things, the physical geography of Southern California, the recent political history relating to it, and the social and civil unrest that culminated in the Los Angeles riots are adduced as a gloss on the events in both *Buffy TVS* and *Angel*. Kim Stanley Robinson's California trilogy ends with a major conflict over water rights in this area, and Californian water has been at the core of many fine fictions including the movie *Chinatown*. While Jack Nicholson is undergoing nasal re-arrangement at the hands of Roman Polanski, did it ever occur to you to wonder what all those amazing storm drains and channels are for? They also feature in the classic movie *Them* – but it never rains in California!

Tonkin assures us that the whole economy of Southern California (So Cal) is predicated on the fact that it never rains, but once every ten years it floods. And said flood hasn't happened

for too long. Like waiting for the other boot to fall, the inhabitants of So Cal are living quite literally on the brink of disaster, so that the frequent ends-of-the-world that Buffy saves us from, far from being hyperbole, are in fact little more than metaphors for the real state of affairs in So Cal. This kind of mapping between fiction and reality is more fascinating than the fiction itself so that I begin to feel that this might even be the attraction of science fiction for me *per se*.

It is sad to say that this was the most revelatory moment in reading this book. In "Vampire Dialectics: Knowledge, Institutions and Labour," Brian Wall and Michael Zryd reveal far more about themselves than the subject. This is actually the only essay here that I failed to finish reading (it is also, apart from Kaveney's introduction, one of the longest). The language of Marxist dialectic does not sit easily in a So Cal context, and the turgid and lumpen prose so deadens the senses that as the fact that there is a point to all this emerges, so the reader feels relief that it is no longer necessary to read all the way to the end. It says here that Brian Wall is completing a doctoral study on Samuel Beckett in the electronic media. Pity he isn't studying Beckett's writing, then, for if he had, some of Beckett's wonderful way with words might have rubbed off. As it is, while I am almost entirely in sympathy with the sentiments, their prose is an insuperable obstacle to them making any converts to their opinions.

The next piece, "Laugh, Spawn of Hell, Laugh," by Steve Wilson is a much-needed tonic after all that Marxist worthiness. Wilson has an excellent point to make – that the comedy here is a fine achievement in its own right, as well as a mark of the excellence of the programmes as a whole – but it would be easy to lose this in the welter of remembered and revisited laughs as he demonstrates that the whole gamut of comedy from slapstick to wry irony is represented and used precisely and economically in the show.

It would be pointless to work through each essay agreeing or disagreeing in this way. Suffice it to say that there are essays on place and space, feminism, East Indian movies, Buffy as icon, a super piece on Buffy slash fiction, and a fine conclusion with Ian Shuttleworth's tribute to the astonishing acting ability of the troupe.

What insight there is to be gained from reading this book, however, is not primarily into the show but rather into the writers and the particular axes they have to grind. More and more as I worked through this book I was reminded of a wonderful work called *The Pooh Perplex* that I studied as an

undergraduate. This was a satire on the way over-weening literary criticism can sometimes attempt to annexe a text to promote its own world view, where in fact the only reason for existence of any critical method is as a tool that can be used better to allow us to understand a text. Certainly, the essays here all bear witness to the extraordinary breadth of influences that can be detected in the Buffyverse; but they did very little to help me see why it is so popular. I remain unconvinced as a watcher, even as my wife embarks on a complete re-viewing of the DVD special collectors' editions of the series that I have bought for her as they appeared.

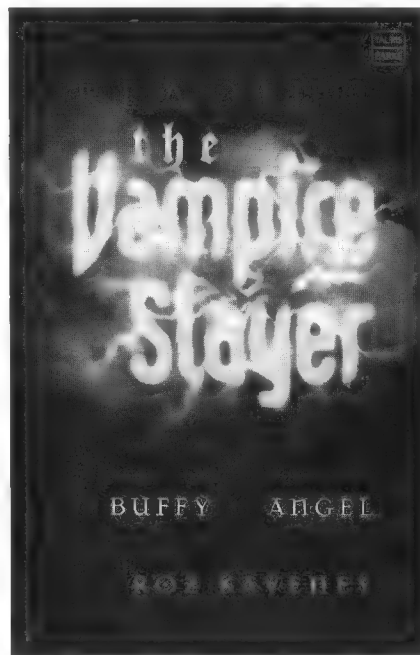
It was interesting reading this book, which deals with Buffy up to the end of series five, while watching series six as it was broadcast. Many of the salient points about the style of the show were demonstrated by episodes that the critics had not even seen when they wrote their pieces, while developmental directions that are traced in the book could be seen to be continuing in the new series. Whether this reflects the integrity of the show or the book is not clear, but what is clear is that merely the existence of this book means that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has garnered a loyal following among deep thinkers who might otherwise have been expected to know better, and if you want to do the show down, you had better do your homework – because they already have.

Strangely, one of the central concerns of *Buffy*, how sexual intercourse can change one's reality, is also the central focus of Paul Di Filippo's masterful new novel, *A Mouthful of Tongues* (Cosmos Books, \$29.99). However, where with *Buffy* the concerns are

from the point of view of a teenage girl for whom sexual awakening is a part of the whole experience of growing up and taking responsibility for her life choices – alongside finding a job, taking legal charge of her little sister, saving the world a lot – Di Filippo appears to have plumped for the pornographer's attitude that sex is good because sex is good. I say "appears to" because it would be easy to be offended by the sheer amount of what appears to be gratuitous and mostly perverse sexual congress in this book. However, persevering to the end of the story reveals that there is a moral purpose and a powerful fictional structure underlying the repeated fornication, and it is good.

I feel slightly under-qualified to comment on this book, because it sprawls so readily from science fiction to fantasy to pornography and back, and while I know science fiction quite well, I've probably read as much pornography as I have fantasy, which is not a lot of either. I have said before that my perception of science fiction is that it concerns probability – you can get there from here; the fictional world is contiguous in time and/or space with our own, and thus science fiction considers the possible, no matter how far-fetched. In contrast, for me, fantasy is about the improbable – you can't get there from here; the fictional world is not and cannot be contiguous with ours in time or space, and thus the only relationship that can exist between it and our world must arise from the parallels between them. Relationship between the fantasy world and the real world is thus established by a kind of induction, and if you don't perceive the parallels, then you won't understand the fiction. By the bye, this makes fantasy a much older fictional form than sf, as all myth is thus fundamentally fantasy, and the interpretation of symbolism that is so much at the heart of most great religions is thus also a part of fantasy; science fiction goes much more towards "protestant literalism."

Now Kurt Vonnegut famously stated in *Slaughterhouse 5* that the basic similarity between science fiction and pornography, and the reason that they are both found in the same shops, is that they are both "fantasies of an impossibly hospitable world." And, thinking about it, however unlikely it might be, pornography is like science fiction in that you can get there from here. The constituents of a pornographic story – the easy availability of all kinds of gratifying sexual engagement with otherwise unattainable partners such as the slightly underage schoolgirl, the beautiful but distant nurse, or the alluring traffic warden – could all exist in the here and now. It is only the interaction between them and the man (who is a stand-in for the



reader) that is fanciful.

Di Filippo's story starts out conventionally enough with the setting up of a beautiful-but-flawed woman in an ambiguous situation – in this case, a businessman detains his lovely assistant to entertain clients who mysteriously fail to show up. But the business that they are intent on is purely science-fictional; this is the future, 2015 to be precise, and the research arm of the business has created a living biological product that the government is very interested in. There has been some kind of civil collapse, and soldiers patrol the city streets, while big business and big money attempt to carry on as if nothing has happened.

This science-fictional scenario is, however, preceded by an extremely explicit bestial fantasy that, as stated in the first line of the book, is her dream. This pornographic element then re-establishes itself when the lovely assistant, having been creaped out by her boss's advances, has other unpleasant sexual encounters that disempower her, treat her as no more than a sexual object, and leave her traumatized, humiliated and suicidal.

This is part one of the book. Part two, the central and by far the longest section, appears to be her dying fantasy, and involves a great deal of sexual activity. Part three takes the situation set up in the first part and the attitudes developed in the second, and resolves both satisfactorily. That this structure works so well despite the gruesomely detailed sex acts within it is a tribute to the consummate skill of Di Filippo as a writer. Indeed, in among the stiff dicks straining the holes they are entering, there are passages that reminded me very strongly of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* –

Behind the main bar at The Blue Afternoon Hotel, a curving prow of dark polished sculpted wood, Arlindo Quincas briskly skippered his responsive yet inanimate crew of glasses and bottles. Squat pebbled tumblers, steep-sided shot thimbles, long-stemmed flutes, wide-mouthed crystal, big-handled octagonal mugs. Squarish, elongate or wasp-waisted liters, round-bellied flagons, flattish flasks, even one bottle shaped like a woman with arms upraised overhead to accept a cork between swandiver-braced hands. Temporarily resident in these motley bottles on their several journeys to assorted stomachs, the step-ranked liquors of a hundred colors doubled themselves in a long mirror.

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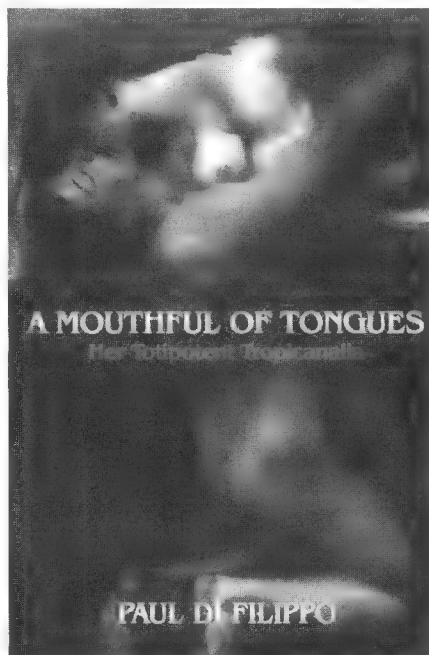
This is hardly the kind of writing one would expect from a pornographic novel, and the fact the Di Filippo can write so evocatively, albeit there is a

subtle sub-text of sexual tension even in this innocent description, can only indicate that the constant description of sexual acts is intended as far more than mere titillation; what that intention is, however, is not clear to this reader.

This book comes with a glowing endorsement from Samuel R. Delany, and my interest in Delany's work is the reason I was reading it. It is well known that Delany has moved away from his original mainline science fiction and fantasy fiction first via the deeply strange and very explicit best seller *Dhalgren*, then via the Neverona series of books – highly sexually explicit ancient historical fantasies that also manage to explore the genesis and function of language in great detail – to several explicitly pornographic texts – *The Tides of Lust*, *Hogg*, and *The Mad Man* all spring to mind, as well as the remarkable graphic novel he produced with Howard Chaykin that chronicled his gay love affair with a homeless man he met in Central Park.

Now my problem with all this is the pornographer's problem since the beginning of time: how do you make this one act interesting? Personally, I don't find explicit descriptions of sex acts any more interesting than the occasional detailed descriptions I have encountered in fiction of how a bullet ruptures and mangles the human flesh it passes through. I find it creepy. It is the result that is important, not the way it was achieved. Only rarely is the actual sexual act of any relevance to the story being told, except where telling the story is simply an excuse for depicting a sexual act, which brings us back in a neat circle to the problem of pornography.

Pornography triggers a man's lust.



I'm a man, I'll own up, and the sight of pretty unclothed women or the depiction of sexual acts triggers my lust. Thus I have some interest in pornography. But most pornography, be it written, as in some men's magazines, or televisual, as in the movies you can find late at night on some cable channels, beyond this initial stimulation is ineffably dull. What is interesting is the relationship between the two people, and one of the reasons I enjoy some pornographic films is that they contain depictions of beautiful unclothed women, and I enjoy their beauty, which is a form of relationship, however distant, between us, and then I suddenly find myself annoyed and distracted by their sudden adoption of absurd poses in order to live out someone else's unimaginative scenario (if you watch cable TV very late at night, you will see programmes that go behind the scenes to show these women making the movies, and then show them being interviewed as themselves, often while still "dressed" for work, and it is fascinating to see a naked beautiful woman talking to camera naturally, without any of the badly-acted lasciviousness that they have to demonstrate while they are working – it would be a great argument for nudism, if only it were warm enough in this country to go without clothes...).

The point of all this is that around all the fucking, which is always the same no matter how many different ways it is described, there are real people who *qua* people are infinitely various and different and fascinating, and the important thing about sex is not doing it per se, but doing it with someone you care about. Di Filippo's novel describes a series of sex acts that move from rapine to tender love making, and then remake the vile world by turning its violent self-gratification back upon its practitioners who are metamorphosed into the beginnings of a tropical paradise that will gradually erase the corrupt city. As such, there are many strong echoes of Delany, and I can only raise a mildly complaining voice that there was really rather more of the unpleasant sex than there was of the lovemaking – I enjoy well-written depictions of tender moments between people almost as much as taking part in them. But it is invidious to carp thus. This novel is a superb achievement, and an adornment to the reputation of its publishers, Cosmos Books. In this world where publishers play ever more safe in trying to hit the best-seller lists all the time, it is good that there are still publishers who will take chances in order to make work such as this available. More power to them, and success to both them and Paul Di Filippo.

Paul Brazier



BOOKS RECEIVED



MAY
2002

This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Aylett, Steve. **Only an Alligator.** "Accomplice Book 1." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-961-9, 133pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; written in Aylett's now-customary surreal-humorous style, it's set in "a city one step to the left of reality.") 13th June 2002.

Aylett, Steve. **The Velocity Gospel.** "Accomplice Book 2." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07088-9, 131pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; another slim [but dense] piece of freaky lit [or "bizarre pulp," as *The Scotsman's* reviewer calls it] from Aylett; he resembles a latter-day British version of US hippy fantasist Richard Brautigan.) 31st May 2002.

Barker, Clive. **Coldheart Canyon.** "A Hollywood Ghost Story." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-651040-X, x+751pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 2001; it concerns the lore and legend of Hollywood, a subject which Liverpool boy Barker should know well

after 15 years' residence there.) 7th May 2002.

Bujold, Lois McMaster. **The Curse of Chalion.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-713360-X, 442pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £11.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; three-time Hugo-winner Bujold takes a break from her usual space-opera sf to produce a fantasy of the Big Commercial sort – "rich in atmosphere, magic, character, and romance.") 1st July 2002.

Calder, Richard. **Lord Soho: A Time Opera.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-7434-0896-9, 378pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Episodic sf/fantasy novel, first edition; a quasi-sequel to Calder's novel *Malignos* [2000], set further into that book's future world, it originally appeared as a series of novellas in *Interzone* – "Lord Soho" [#154], "Incunabula" [#159], "The Lady of the Carnelias" [#161], "The Nephilim" [#164], "Roach Motel" [#166] and "Espiritu Santo" [#170].) 5th June 2002.

Carroll, Jonathan. **The Wooden Sea.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07291-1, 296pp, A-format paperback, cover by Joe del Tufo, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; reviewed by Tom Arden in *Interzone* 166.) 23rd May 2002.

Chiang, Ted. **Stories of Your Life and Others.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30418-X, 335pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; here we have something remarkable: a debut collection of stories by a writer who has been around for a dozen years but has written no novels; moreover, this volume contains *all* of his published stories to date, just eight of them [one of which is original to the book]; more remarkable still, the volume comes with ecstatic commendations from the likes of Greg Bear, David Brin, Octavia Butler, Karen Joy Fowler, James Patrick Kelly, Nancy Kress and Michael Swanwick; all of which goes to show that *it can still be done* – in the sf field a major reputation can be built on short stories alone.) July 2002.

Cole, Stephen. **Ten Little Aliens.** "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53853-8, 281pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the First Doctor, Ben and Polly; it has a moderately witty title, for those who remember a certain Agatha Christie novel.) 3rd June 2002.

Constantine, Storm. **The Way of Light.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07293-8, 408pp, A-format paperback, cover by Anne Sudworth, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; follow-up to *Sea Dragon*

Heir [1999] and *Crown of Silence* [2000] in the "Chronicles of Magravandias" trilogy.) 13th June 2002.

Cornell, Paul. **Something More.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-959-7, 422pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; this was Cornell's "break-out" book as a serious sf writer, most of his works having been "Doctor Who" spinoff novels; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 175.) 13th June 2002.

Di Filippo, Paul. **A Year in the Linear City.** Introduction by Michael Bishop. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-36-6, 80pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £8. (Sf novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hardcover copies.) *Late entry: April publication, received in May 2002.*

Donaldson, Stephen. **The Power That Preserves: The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever, Volume Three.** "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-712784-7, 573pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1977; number 31 in the dark blue-covered "Voyager Classics" series.) 17th June 2002.

Drake, David. **Mistress of the Catacombs.** "The fourth novel in the epic saga of *Lord of the Isles*." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07427-2, xiv+636pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; more BCF bloat, a follow-up to *Lord of the Isles* [1997], *Queen of Demons* [1998] and *Servant of the Dragon* [1999].) 9th May 2002.

Eddings, David. **The Ruby Knight: Book Two of The Elenium.** "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-712782-0, 444pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; number 32 in the "Voyager Classics" series – HarperCollins seem to be slinging into this series every sf, fantasy or horror title which has sold well for them.) 17th June 2002.

Erikson, Steven. **Blood Follows.** Introduction by Stephen R. Donaldson. PS Publishing [Hamilton House, 4 Park Ave., Harrogate, N. Yorks. HG2 9BQ], ISBN 1-902880-34-X, 90pp, small-press trade paperback, cover by Edward Miller, £8. (Fantasy novella, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £25 [not seen]; this is a signed edition, limited to 500 numbered paperback copies and 300 numbered hard-

cover copies.) *Late entry: March publication, received in May 2002.*

Feist, Raymond E., and William R. Forstchen. **Honoured Enemy.** "Legends of the Riftwar." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648388-7, 323pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the opener in a new series set in the world of Feist's earlier, solo, "Riftwar" novels.) 7th May 2002.

Feist, Raymond E., and Joel Rosenberg. **Murder in LaMut.** "Legends of the Riftwar." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224720-8, 324pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; second in what appears to be a sharecropped series, following *Honoured Enemy* [2001] which was by Feist and William Forstchen.) 5th June 2002.

Flammarion, Camille. **Lumen.** Translated by Brian Stableford. "Early Classics of Science Fiction." Wesleyan University Press [110 Mt Vernon St., Middletown, CT 06459, USA], ISBN 0-8195-6568-7, xxxv+153pp, trade paperback, cover by Gustave Doré, \$17.95. (Sf novel, first published in France as part of *Récits de l'infini*, 1872; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at \$45; an historically important work, at last made available in a modern English-language edition, it also contains a long introduction and extensive notes by the erudite Mr Stableford; Nicolas Camille Flammarion [1842-1925] was a popular astronomer whose work gradually metamorphosed from imaginative non-fiction to out-and-out scientific romance – making him perhaps the second most important name in 19th-century French sf after Jules Verne; see also his *Omega: The Last Days of the World* [originally *La Fin du monde* (1893)], reissued by the University of Nebraska's Bison Books in 1999.) 1st July 2002.

Flewelling, Lynn. **The Bone Doll's Twin: Book One of the Tamir Triad.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711308-0, 438pp, A-format paperback, cover by George Underwood, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001; such solid names as "Robin Hobb" and George R. R. Martin commend it; we're also told that the author [born 1958] lists her "favourite writers and influences" as "Tom Stoppard, Mary Renault, Umberto Eco" and others – all of which amounts to a set of not-so-subtle clues that this is commercial fantasy of the more literate sort.) 17th June 2002.

Ford, Jeffrey. **The Fantasy Writer's Assistant and Other Stories.** Introduc-

tion by Michael Swanwick. Golden Gryphon Press [3002 Perkins Rd., Urbana, IL 61802, USA], ISBN 1-930846-10-X, xiii+247pp, hardcover, cover by John Picacio, \$23.95. (Fantasy collection, first edition; it contains 16 stories, three of which, "Bright Morning," "Out of the Canyon" and "Something by the Sea," are original to the book – although several others have been "published" only on-line, mostly at Ellen Datlow's *Sci Fiction* website; a few are from *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and one is from a literary journal, *Northwest Review*; Jeffrey Ford [born 1955] is still relatively unknown in Britain, but looks to be an interesting, quirky talent; so this sampler is recommended.) June 2002.

Gray, Muriel. **The Ancient.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-649641-5, 358pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the UK, 2001; this is Glaswegian author Gray's third novel, and it comes with a commendation from Stephen King: "Scary and unputdownable... If you're going to read a single suspenser this year, make it this one.") 7th May 2002.

Harrison, Harry. **Stars and Stripes Triumphant: Stars and Stripes Trilogy, Volume 3.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-68921-8, 249pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, £18.99. (Alternate-world sf novel, first edition; conclusion of the trilogy about a 19th-century war-which-never-happened between Britain and the USA.) 6th June 2002.

Heinlein, Robert A. **The Fantasies of Robert A. Heinlein.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87557-6, 352pp, trade paperback, \$16.95. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1999; eight familiar stories, mostly

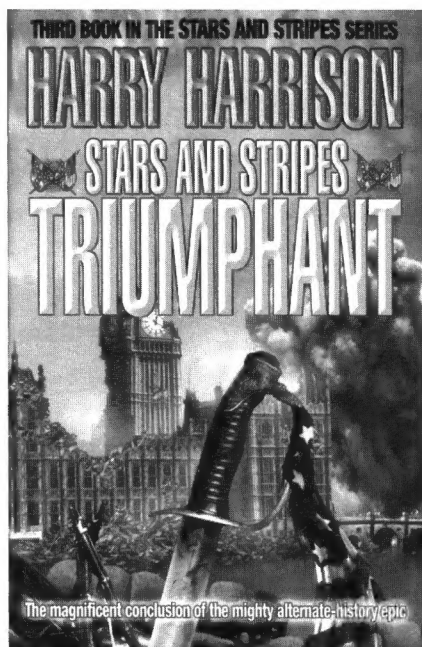
from the 1940s, selected by David G. Hartwell to represent the more fantastic side of Heinlein's imagination; although the obvious items [mostly from *Unknown* magazine], such as the novellas "Magic, Inc." and "The Unpleasant Profession of Jonathan Hoag," are here, so are a few stories usually accepted as sf rather than fantasy – "And He Built a Crooked House," "Waldo" and "All You Zombies"; we thought this paperback edition had already appeared, in 2001, but there's no sign here of that having happened – perhaps it was announced for a year ago but put back.) 23rd May 2002.

Irvine, Alexander C. **A Scattering of Jades.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30116-4, 428pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a writer already known for his short stories in *Fantasy & Science Fiction* and elsewhere, it's set in 19th-century America and features showman P. T. Barnum as a character; the author, it is claimed, is a descendant of the said Mr Barnum; Kage Baker, Charles de Lint, Karen Joy Fowler and James Patrick Kelly are trotted out to praise the book.) July 2002.

Jones, Gwyneth. **Bold as Love.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07292-X, viii+406pp, A-format paperback, cover by Anne Sudworth, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; the first edition's subtitle, "A Near Future Fantasy," has been dropped from this mass-market paperback edition – by design or accident?; winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award for 2002; a pre-publication extract from the opening of this novel appeared as "The Salt Box" in *Interzone* 169; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *IZ* 173.) 6th June 2002.

King, Stephen. **Dreamcatcher.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-77072-4, 694pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 2001; another big sprawly read, in King's classic vein.) 6th June 2002.

Kitchin, Rob, and James Kneale, eds. **Lost in Space: Geographies of Science Fiction.** Foreword by Michael Marshall Smith. Continuum [Tower Building, 11 York Rd., London SE1 7NX], ISBN 0-8264-5731-2, xii+211pp, trade paperback, cover by David Griffith, £16.99. (Illustrated collection of academic essays on aspects of geography and sf; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £60 – a ludicrous price for a volume of this average size; as with last month's book on archaeology and sf, *Digging Holes in Popular Culture* [see *IZ* 180, p65], the contributors'





names are all unfamiliar to us – Stuart C. Aitken, Nick Bingham, David B. Clarke, Marcus A. Doel, Sheila Hones, Shaun Huston [not the horror novelist Shaun Hutson!], Michelle Kendrick, Barbara J. Morehouse, Jonathan S. Taylor, Barney Warf and others – but they cover some interesting topics and authors: “Alternate Histories, Contingent Geographies,” Neal Stephenson, Marge Piercy, J. G. Ballard [“Geographical Imaginings in the Work of JGB”], “City Space and SF Horror Movies,” Kim Stanley Robinson, etc, etc; worth a look for the academically inclined.) Late entry: April publication, received in May 2002.

Langford, David. **The Wyrdest Link: A Second Discworld Quizbook.** Introduction by Terry Pratchett. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07319-5, x+213pp, B-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £6.99. (Quizbook based on Pratchett’s humorous fantasy novels, first edition; follow-up to *The Unseen University Challenge* [1996], it’s similarly erudite and recommendable; there’s a cover by the late great Kirby [1928-2001], “who sadly died on the day this book was delivered,” and there’s a juicy quote on the back cover: “I’d be willing to wrestle a polar bear if it was lying on a Langford book that I hadn’t read yet!” – Lionel Fanthorpe.) Late entry: 25th April publication, received in May 2002.

Lindholm, Megan. **The Limbreth Gate.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711254-8, 360pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Gregory, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983; follow-up to *Harpy’s Flight* and *The Windsingers* in “The Ki and Vandien Quartet”; the cover describes the author as “Megan Lindholm... WHO ALSO WRITES AS ROBIN HOBB.”) 7th May 2002.

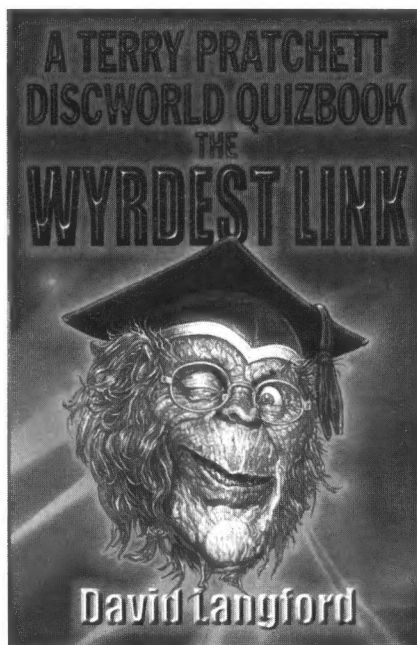
Lovecraft, H. P. **At the Mountains of Madness and Other Novels of Terror.** Introduction by August Derleth. “Voyager Classics.” Voyager, ISBN 0-00-712777-4, 552pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Sf/horror/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1964; number 29 in the “Voyager Classics” series; it contains HPL’s three short novels – “At the Mountains of Madness,” “The Case of Charles Dexter Ward” and “The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath” plus four briefer tales; vintage stuff, but it appears to be a straight reprint of the 1964 Arkham House volume, as first published in Britain by Gollancz in 1966; so much work has been done on the “correction” and annotation of Lovecraft’s texts since then – not least by S. T. Joshi – that HPL purists will no doubt prefer to seek out more recent editions [e.g. the volumes

published by Penguin Books in their “Twentieth-Century Classics” series].) 17th June 2002.

Lyons, Steve. **The Crooked World.** “Doctor Who.” BBC, 0-563-53856-2, 252pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor.) 3rd June 2002.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Freedom’s Ransom.** “The fourth in the brilliant Catteni sequence.” Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04832-6, 320pp, hardcover, cover by Fred Gambino, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; follow-up to *Freedom’s Challenge* [1998].) 2nd May 2002.

Merril, Judith, and Emily Pohl-Weary. **Better to Have Loved: The Life of Judith Merrill.** Between the Lines [720 Bathurst St., Suite 404, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2R4, Canada], ISBN 1-896357-57-1, xv+282pp, trade paperback, no Canadian or British price shown [but \$19.95 in the USA]. (“Autobiography” of a leading American sf writer and editor, first edition; for further information on ordering, see the publisher’s website: www.btlbooks.com; the late Judith Merrill [1923-1997] led quite a life, and in her later years, when she was resident in Canada, she decided to write an autobiography; it was never completed, but her granddaughter Emily [presumably also the granddaughter of sf writer Frederik Pohl, to whom Merrill was married, 1949-1952] has now pieced together the fragments, with supporting material, in this well-produced, heavily illustrated volume; it contains a wealth of sf genre history and anecdote; recommended.) No date shown: received in May 2002.



Mitchell, Charles P. **The Devil on Screen: Feature Films Worldwide, 1913 through 2000.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1049-3, vi+337pp, hardcover, £47.75. (Illustrated, heavily annotated, alphabetical listing of all films, most of them horror or fantasy, that have featured the Devil, or Satan, as a character; first published in the USA, 2002; the sterling-priced import copies are available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; it contains all the lowdown you could want on Diabolical movies from *Alias Nick Beal* [Ray Milland as the Devil] to *The Witches of Eastwick* [Jack Nicholson as the Devil]; since the book covers a long time-span, 1913-2000, a chronological arrangement would have been preferable, but it’s indexed, and there’s also an appendix on “Television Devils”; we’re told that the author has forthcoming another, similar work called *The Hitler Filmography* – which seems like a logical follow-up.) 20th June 2002.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Archform: Beauty.** Tor, ISBN 0-765-30433-3, 330pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it appears to be a new stand-alone novel [if it’s the first of a series, it’s not labelled as such], concerning nanotechnology – by a prolific Big Commercial Fantasist who has always had one foot in fairly hard sf.) July 2002.

Moorcock, Michael. **Corum: The Prince in the Scarlet Robe.** “Fantasy Masterworks, 30.” Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07366-7, 486pp, B-format paperback, cover by Donato, £6.99. (Fantasy omnibus, first published in the UK in more-or-less this form as *The Swords of Corum*, 1986; it contains the novels *The Knight of the Swords* [1971], *The Queen of the Swords* [1971] and *The King of the Swords* [1972], plus a one-page “Dear Reader” preface by the author [in which he talks about Cornwall and various writers of yesteryear such as Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, R. D. Blackmore and Henry Treece]; it appears to follow the probably revised text of the Orion/Millennium hardcover edition of 1992 which was entitled simply *Corum* and subtitled on the cover “The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 4” – there, is that clear?) 13th June 2002.

Morton, Oliver. **Mapping Mars: Science, Imagination and the Birth of a World.** Fourth Estate, ISBN 1-84115-668-X, xv+351pp, hardcover, £18.99. (Popular science text, first edition; illustrated with 16 pages of colour photographs and end-paper maps; by a “slick” British journalist – former science editor of *The Economist*, contributing editor to *Wired*, contributor to *The New*

Yorker, etc, etc – this is a well-informed meditation on the subject of the planet Mars, in human imagination and in scientific reality; Morton knows his sf, and drops all the right names, from H. G. Wells and Edgar Rice Burroughs to Philip K. Dick and Kim Stanley Robinson.) 10th June 2002.

Napier, Bill. **The Lure.** "Some secrets should never be uncovered." Headline, ISBN 0-7472-6923-8, 310pp, hardcover, cover by Lee Gibbons, £18.99. (Sf novel, first edition; this is packaged as a thriller for the mainstream audience, but seems to be straightforward sf about a signal received from outer space; we haven't heard of the author before, although he has written two previous novels, *Nemesis* and *Revelation*, and is described by his publishers as "Britain's answer to Michael Crichton"; he is Scottish by background, an astronomer by profession, and works in Northern Ireland.) June 2002.

Parker, K. J. **Pattern: The Scavenger Trilogy, Book Two.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-107-1, 568pp, C-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £10.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 30th May 2002.

Parker, K. J. **Shadow: The Scavenger Trilogy, Book One.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-105-5, 572pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2001; praised by the reviewer in *SFX* magazine as "one of the most entertaining fantasy debuts in recent years.") 30th May 2002.

Pitts, Michael R. **Horror Film Stars. Third Edition.** McFarland, ISBN 0-7864-1052-3, viii+568pp, trade paperback, \$39.95. (Illustrated who's who of actors who have appeared in horror movies; first edition of this revision [previous editions appeared in 1979 and 1991]; sterling-priced import copies should be available in the UK from Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN; a large, double-columned volume, it covers all the obvious, and many not-so-obvious, names from John Agar to George Zucco, with a full filmographies and copious notes on each; a useful reference book.) July 2002.

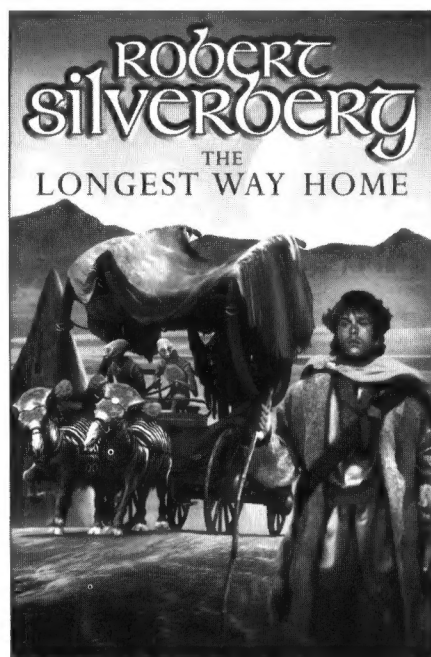
Reimann, Katya. **Prince of Fire and Ashes.** "Book 3 of The Tielmaran Chronicles." Tor, ISBN 0-312-86009-9, 477pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; we're told that the author, who resides in Minnesota, "lived for six years in Oxford, England, where she wrote a Ph.D. dissertation about pirates.") July 2002.

Roberts, Adam. **On.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07299-7, 388pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2001; this is the second novel by Roberts, following his highly-praised *Salt* [2000], which was nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke Award; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 172.) 6th June 2002.

Robinson, Kim Stanley. **Vinland the Dream and Other Stories.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-713404-5, 410pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf collection, first edition; another reshuffling of Robinson's short stories, it contains 14 pieces, most of which previously appeared in either *The Planet on the Table* [1986] or *Remaking History* [1991]; the only hitherto uncollected story is "Discovering Life" [2000].) 7th May 2002.

Schmidt, Stanley. **Argonaut.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87726-9, 333pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; Schmidt's first new novel in many years [he has been busy editing *Analog* magazine], it concerns a near-future alien invasion of Earth.) July 2002.

Silverberg, Robert. **The Longest Way Home.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07352-7, 213pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £10.99. (Sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen] priced at £16.99; this slim new novel by old master Silverberg was first serialized in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, October 2001-January 2002 – a circumstance which make us feel quite nostalgic for the days when most new sf novels were of this modest



length and many of them were serialized in magazines prior to book publication.) 16th May 2001.

Smith, Michael Marshall. **Only Forward.** "Voyager Classics." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-712775-8, 310pp, B-format paperback, £8.99. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the UK, 1994; number 36 in the "Voyager Classics" series.) 17th June 2002.

Turtledove, Harry. **American Empire: Blood and Iron.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-71552-9, 661pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £7.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; first part of a follow-up series to the author's three-volume "Great War" series [not to be confused with his "Worldwar" series, or any of the several other series he has had on the go recently].) 16th May 2002.

Van Lustbader, Eric. **The Veil of a Thousand Tears: Volume Two of The Pearl Saga.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224730-5, 630pp, hardcover, cover by John Howe, £18.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *The Ring of Five Dragons* [2001]; the author has restored the original "Van" to his name, after several years of publishing simply as "Eric Lustbader.") 7th May 2002.

Van Lustbader, Eric. **The Veil of a Thousand Tears: Volume Two of The Pearl.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87236-4, 672pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2002; proof copy received; a Big Commercial Fantasy by a veteran author, it's set partly on another planet, "where magic is the basis of the pastoral, egalitarian Kundalan civilization..." which comes under attack from "a brutally militaristic empire ruled by long-lived technomages"; the British edition, listed above, is the first.) 29th July 2002.

Willis, Connie. **Passage.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-711826-0, 780pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2001; it concerns research into near-death experiences, and seems to be slanted towards the mainstream reader; shortlisted for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, 2002; reviewed by Nick Gevers in *Interzone* 172.) 20th May 2002.

Wurts, Janny. **Peril's Gate: The Wars of Light and Shadow, Volume 6: Third Book of The Alliance of Light.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710108-2, 800pp, A-format paperback, cover by the author, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2001.) 5th June 2002.

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